

LESSONS FROM A FRACTURED FAMILY

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CHAPTER 1 – SAFE AT LAST

My dad handed me another box as we continued unloading the moving truck. This was me and Jenny's seventh move in ten years of marriage. Thankfully, this move was different from previous moves. We were finally in it *together*. After four years of restoration and healing, our marriage finally felt safe and stable. We were a team.

Most of the previous moves, some across state lines, were driven by an obsession on my part to pursue a great spiritual calling I was convinced the Lord had in store for me. Nearly everyone in my life – my wife, family members, friends, and pastors – tried to warn me against the reckless decisions I was making as I followed what I thought was the Lord's voice from one destination to the next. They saw what it was doing to my character, my marriage, my career, and my finances. But I was unreachable. *Following the high calling of the Lord requires sacrifice and always evokes family opposition*, I reasoned. *This is part of taking up my cross.*

Now, reflecting on those wasted years and the trauma they caused my family, I felt remorse. But the larger emotion I felt was gratitude for the Lord and the loved ones whose counsel I once confidently rejected. Had it not been for their prayers and forgiveness, not only would I likely be divorced and spiritually lost, but I also wouldn't have these two little daughters, twenty months and two months old. Even though I was still in deep debt from all my foolish decisions, I felt like a rich man. I put the moving box down for a moment, looked at my dad, and said, *"I wish I didn't wait so long to start a family. I just didn't know what I was missing."*

About This Book

This is the second book in a two-book series. The first book, *Lessons from a Near Divorce*, covered marriage and sexuality. This second book covers parenthood and intergenerational relationships.

Much of what I wrote in this book I learned through my mistakes. For several years, I badly mistreated my wife, rejected counsel from my parents, in-laws, pastors, and friends, and nearly destroyed my marriage. I discuss bits and pieces of my testimony throughout. After I repented, through scripture, the Lord began showing me how He views my marriage, my children, my parents, and other spiritual influencers in my life. He taught me how the enemy attacks these relationships and how to overcome him. He taught me principles for how to protect and nurture them.

In addition, the book addresses several topics not directly connected to my personal journey, but are nevertheless related to the overall themes of parenthood and intergenerational relationships.

All scripture quotations are from the NASB version unless otherwise stated. This is an important point because some of the passages I quote or cite are worded quite differently in other versions, sometimes even saying the opposite of what the NASB states. Therefore, when

checking any quotations or citations for accuracy, I strongly recommend using a literal word-for-word translation such as NASB, NKJV, KJV, or YLT rather than popular thought-for-thought translations, or interpretations, which leave far more room for translators to insert their own views and doctrines into the text.

This book is available free of charge through my website, www.danielbecklessons.com. If you benefit from this and other books/papers/articles I've written, please consider supporting my work with a donation through my website. Regardless of whether you donate, thank you sincerely for taking the time to read my work.

CHAPTER 2 – PARENTHOOD

Parents are literally the creators of their children. We tend to think of God as our Creator, which He is. But He didn't create us out of nothing. He partnered with our parents as co-creators. This is a position of great honor. We represent God to our children and we will be judged for how we steward this responsibility.

God created men and women in His image so they could in turn create sons and daughters in their image. When Adam and Eve gave birth to Seth, who was the beginning of a godly family legacy on the earth, Genesis 5:3 says Adam **“became the father of a son in his own likeness, according to his image...”** Being able to reproduce ourselves is core to our identity as image-bearers. We can more fully relate to God as a Father and as a nurturer (ex. Deuteronomy 32:18, Isaiah 49:15, 66:13, Matthew 23:37) because we ourselves can *become* fathers and mothers. We better understand what it means to be part of God's family because we can create our own families.

Being a parent teaches us about God's experience. We create free-will beings that bear our image. We feel unconditional love for them. We carefully control their environment to nurture them like God did in the Garden of Eden. We give them commands for their protection like God did with Adam and Eve. We allow them to exercise their free-wills and experience the consequences of their choices like God did when mankind fell. We want to bless our children and help them mature, but we cannot control them like robots. We guide them the best we can, but they ultimately decide for themselves whether to return our love, what choices to make, and what kind of character to develop.

In early childhood, parents are literally like God to their children. Children look to their parents for *everything*. They learn how to walk, talk, and think by watching their parents. They learn how to treat others, what a man is like, what a woman is like, right from wrong, and truth from error. They believe whatever their parents teach and imitate whatever they model. They are like soft clay in a potter's hands. After co-creating their physical bodies at conception and birth, parents go on to shape their children's souls.

Parenthood is a call to ministry. Jesus said in Matthew 18:5, **“Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me.”** The ultimate fulfillment of this statement is parenthood.

Parenthood is also a call to greatness. Jesus said in Luke 9:48, saying, **“Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great.”**

A primary purpose for becoming a parent can be found in Romans 8:29, which says, **“For those who He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son.”** We become parents to be conformed to Christ's image. Successful parenting causes us to become someone worthy of our children's emulation so that when they see us, they see something of God's nature.

People only retain a small percentage of the information they are taught, but retain as much as 90% of the information they teach to someone else. This is good news for parents since parenting gives us occasion to teach wisdom and righteousness to our children. When we teach our children, the Lord continually checks our hearts against our words. If we teach them about forgiveness, respect for authority, humility, stewardship of time/money/talents, etc..., the Holy Spirit is right there to ask us whether we are doing those things ourselves.

What We Long For

Human beings are relational. We crave love and acceptance. One reason there is nothing more wonderful than being in God's presence in heaven is because He is the Ultimate Source of security, identity, and purpose. With Him, we are fully known and fully loved. With Him, we know we have infinite value.

By contrast, there is nothing more terrible than being separated from God in hell. In hell, there is no sense of being loved or secure. There is no purpose to fulfill or hope for the future. There is only grief and fear.

As representatives of God, parents have the power to give their children tastes of heaven or tastes of hell. There is nothing more wonderful for a child than being unconditionally loved by its creators. The security and identity that come from such a home environment are irreplaceable. However, there is nothing more awful for a child than being neglected or abused. The insecurity and trauma this produces can be unbearable.

God Delights in Us

Several years ago, I was planning to spend a day with my seven-year-old cousin, but I felt a little anxious because I wasn't sure what we could do that would be fun for her. When I shared this with my wife Jenny she said, *"What matters most is that you genuinely enjoy being with her. If she senses that, it will impart so much value to her and it won't matter as much what activity you end up doing."*

This resonated. About 15 minutes later I sat down for a devotional time and happened to read John 15:11, which says, **"These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full."** It struck me that the greatest joy we were created for is to experience God delighting in us. Just the like passage says, first He takes joy in us, *then* our joy is made full as a result.

When children experience their parents delighting in them, they begin to believe they are valuable, loved, and secure. A parent's capacity to give this to his children is related to how much he is experiencing this himself from God. Therefore, a parent's first task is to grow closer to God so we can better mirror Him to our children.

Next

In the next chapter, we will learn more about how God fathers His children.

CHAPTER 3 – A PARENT’S RESPONSIBILITY

If a parent’s primary task is to mirror God to his children, what kind of Parent is God? What responsibilities does He have as our Father?

God promises these three things to His children in scripture:

- 1) His Presence (ex. Hebrews 13:5)
- 2) A Commitment to our Spiritual Growth (ex. Romans 8:28-29)
- 3) Physical Provision (ex. Matthew 7:33)

His Presence

When God is our Father, we know that no matter what we face, we are never alone. We are His highest priority. He is always available to listen; He is never too busy to spend time with us.

The final words of Jesus’ great commission (Matthew 28) were, **“I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”** Psalms 139:7 rhetorically asks, **“Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?”** Psalms 23:4 states, **“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me.”**

A parent can give his children every external thing world in the world, but without his presence, it is a meaningless substitute for what they need the most. This is why, when we get distracted by lesser things in life, God reminds us that His presence is the most valuable thing we will ever have. This is why Hebrews 13:5 exhorts us to be **“...content with what you have; for He Himself has said, “I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.”**

A Commitment to our Spiritual Growth

Perhaps God’s commitment to our spiritual growth could be broken down like this:

- 1) **Modeling** – Being a living illustration of righteous character and actions
- 2) **Teaching** – Explaining what is being modeled and why it is important
- 3) **Training** – Helping to practice what is modeled through encouragement and feedback
- 4) **Discipline** – Providing negative consequences for intentionally rebelling against what is modeled and taught

God is not a hypocritical parent. He never asks His children to do something that He Himself is not doing. Nor does He expect us to live beyond our ability. Instead, He offers Himself as an example and then patiently teaches and trains us to imitate Him. He does this through His Word, by His Holy Spirit, and by His anointing on other people.

Acts 1:1 says that Jesus would always **“do and teach”**. First He showed His disciples what righteousness looked like. Then He explained it to them and trained them to imitate Him. We see this throughout the gospels. Everything Jesus did, He then commanded the disciples to do.

This is why He could say to them before He departed (John 20:21), **“As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.”**

As parents, we have no spiritual or moral authority to teach our children things we aren’t doing ourselves. Nor do we have authority to discipline them for the same negative things we are doing. This does not mean we have to live out our words perfectly. But it does mean we need to at least be sincerely pursuing righteousness in those areas. It also means being appropriately honest with them about our faults and struggles, which is to model humility. It means apologizing and owning it when we fall short.

The Bible says repeatedly, **“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”** There is a sense in which it is right for us to fear God’s authority over us. He holds our entire world in the palm of His hand. He is all-powerful and all-knowing. The boundaries He gives us are not arbitrary, even if we do not understand them or agree with them. Therefore, He is willing to provide negative consequences, sometimes severe ones, to teach us that sin is serious and dangerous.

Good, loving parents do likewise. How will children learn to fear and respect God’s authority if they do not feel any fear of us when they are caught intentionally disobeying? They need to know that, because we love them so much, we are willing to make it painful for them to choose rebellion. One pastor who lived next to a busy intersection said this: *If my children’s love for me does not keep them out of the street, then their fear of me will!*

However, we must be careful. Sometimes we can punish our children simply because they are making our life more difficult and we have the power to make it stop. We punish them for our sake, not theirs. This is a distortion of God’s nature. God only disciplines us for our own sake (Hebrews 12:10); it is never repayment for causing Him embarrassment, irritation, or pain.

Physical Provision

God promises in Matthew 7:33, **“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things [food and clothing] will be added to you.”** Humanists like to ask, *“Would you steal bread to feed your starving family?”* to prove that morality is relative. However, this scenario of either having to sin or starve doesn’t really exist in God’s economy. Whenever believers genuinely seek first God’s kingdom and righteousness in their lives, He always provides for their physical needs.

It is right and good for parents to want to give their children the very best – the best food, the best clothes, the best education, the best opportunities. God is the same way. God fully intends to give His children the very best of every created thing to enjoy beyond limit or measure. He is excited to do this and we have all of eternity to enjoy these things. Sometimes He gives us tastes of these things in this life as well.

However, God’s primary objective for His children in this age is character formation. Wealth – the power to have the things we want when we want them – is one of the primary idols that

destroy Christians' faith (1 Timothy 6:10) and renders their lives unfruitful (Matthew 13:22). Wealth without character is a curse. Likewise, when human parents give their children whatever they want whenever they want it, it plunges them into ruin. However, parents who prioritize character formation withhold some good things so their children learn that true contentment is not based on possessions, but on relationships and righteous maturity.

Children of God

Here is a brief tangent worth mentioning: The aforementioned promises from scripture (Presence, Commitment to our Spiritual Growth, and Physical Provision) do not apply to all people. In today's growing New Age / Universalist approach to spirituality, even supposed Christian leaders frequently use language to the effect that every human being is a child of God. While I agree that every person is *loved* by God and *called* to become a child of God, as Jesus said in Matthew 22:14, **"many are called but few are chosen"**.

Scripture is clear that becoming a child of God means being spiritually reborn (ex. John 1:12-13). This act is also repeatedly referred to as *adoption* (ex. Romans 8:15), which means the default standing of an unbeliever is a spiritual *orphan*. Therefore, telling an unbeliever he is a child of God is borderline malevolent. It may very well strengthen his false sense of security about not needing to be saved and having nothing to fear after he dies.

Next

Did you know Jesus was a father? So was the apostle Paul. If you question this, you won't for long. In the next chapter, we'll learn about the highest calling human beings are created to fulfill.

CHAPTER 4 – SPIRITUAL PARENTHOOD

Anyone who is physically able can become a biological parent. However, God uses biological parenthood to transform believers into *spiritual* parents. This is the highest calling human beings were created to fulfill. Jesus, Paul, and John all embodied this truth.

Jesus was many things to the disciples. For example, He was their Shepherd (ex. John 10:11), their Teacher (ex. Matthew 10:24), their Master (ex. Matthew 10:24), and their Friend (ex. Luke 12:4). However, the very last role identified in the gospels can be found just before Jesus' crucifixion (John 13:33) and again just before His ascension (John 21:5). These are the only two times He refers to the disciples as His **"children"**. After completing everything He was given to do in their formation, He finally became their spiritual father. This is why Isaiah 9:6 calls Jesus **"Eternal Father"** and why Isaiah 53:10 says, **"He will see His offspring."**

The apostle Paul also had many roles. For example, he was a teacher (2 Timothy 1:11), a pastor (ex. 2 Corinthians 11:29), an evangelist (ex. Romans 15:20), a prophet (ex. 1 Timothy 4:1), and an apostle (2 Timothy 1:11). Yet his own words indicate his greatest role was that of a father. Listen to what he said to his spiritual children, which included the Corinthians, the Galatians, the Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Onesimus (1 Corinthians 4:14, Galatians 4:19, 1 Thessalonians 2:11, 1 Timothy 1:2, Titus 1:4, Philemon 10, respectively).

"For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers... Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me." (1 Corinthians 4:15-16)

"Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us." (1 Thessalonians 2:8)

"For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy." (1 Thessalonians 2:19)

Even though Paul ministered all over the ancient world, his children were different from everyone else. They were special. They were his **"hope"** and **"joy"** and **"glory"** and **"crown of exaltation"**!

Finally, there is the apostle John. He lived longer than any of the original apostles. He wrote the final great prophecy of scripture and arguably the most powerful gospel. What do you suppose was his greatest source of joy at the end of his life? Was it reflecting on his accomplishments or looking forward to heaven? Neither. He told us in his second to last letter: **"I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking the in truth."** (3 John 1:4) He too considered his greatest role to be that of a spiritual father.

(As a side note, Jesus did also call the disciples “children” in Mark 10:24. However, I believe He was referring to their relationship with God the Father, not Himself. This was just after He said to them, “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all” (vs. 16) and just before they asked Him, in astonishment, “Then who can be saved?” (vs. 26) They may have been feeling insecure about their own standing with God and Jesus called them children to reaffirm their identities as God’s children.)

What is a Spiritual Parent?

What does it mean to be a spiritual parent? I believe spiritual parenthood refers to two things: *maturity and influence.*

First, let’s look at maturity. A spiritual parent has reached a level of maturity in an aspect, or aspects, of Christ’s nature so that he or she is ready to pass it on to others in a pure and untainted way. A spiritual parent should be able to say of some area(s) of his life what the apostle Paul said to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 11:1: **“Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.”**

Second, a spiritual parent has so much godly influence on another person or group of people that he forms them in his own image, spiritually – similar to how a biological father passes on his genetic image. Being a spiritual father or mother is much more than just teaching information. It’s about modeling. It’s about imparting identity. A spiritual parent is someone others can *behold* and *be transformed by*.

As I said earlier, it is human nature to be conformed to the image of whatever we spend the most time beholding. This is why 2 Corinthians 3:18 says it is by **“beholding”** Him that we are **“transformed into the same image”** and why Hebrews 2:12 says to fix **“our eyes on Jesus”**. One of the ways we behold Christ is by beholding spiritual parents who model His nature to us.

Every biological parent is called to also become a spiritual parent to his or her children. However, many parents, including Christian parents, do not fulfill this role. Oftentimes, young people who want to live zealously for God have to look outside their family for examples of a spiritual father or mother.

The Faith of Abraham

Let’s briefly look at three more examples of spiritual parents, beginning with Abraham. What is Abraham most known for? He is the father of *faith*. This is why Romans 4:11 calls him **“the father of all who believe”**. Abraham modeled faith in a way that set an example for mankind in every generation since.

Abraham modeled faith in multiple ways. First, he believed God for the forgiveness of his sin and an impartation of His righteousness (Romans 4:3-5, 11). Second, Abraham trusted God to fulfill the promises He had spoken over his life. He persevered in this even though it took several decades and became physically impossible (Romans 4:18-21). Third, Abraham believed

that laying ahold of God's promises was worth the immense cost. He forsook a life of comfort and wealth in his homeland, traveling around like a nomad in foreign lands, and living in tents for decades (Hebrews 11:8-9). Not only that, he didn't even get to see most of what God promised in his lifetime (Hebrews 11:13). He spent his life pursuing promises that would mostly be fulfilled in future generations and in the ages to come (Hebrews 11:10, 12, 16).

Abraham had great faith, but how much good would it have accomplished if he didn't pass it on? In Genesis 18:19, God said of Abraham:

"For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him."

God did not choose Abraham only because of his faith, but also because he had the heart of a father. He knew Abraham would be faithful to pass on a legacy to his children that would endure. Without this vital component, Abraham's faith would have died when he died. His impact on history would have been microscopic compared to what it is today.

It is interesting to note that Abraham's father Terah may actually have been called to inherit the promises that were given to his son, but chose to settle for less. Genesis 11:31 says that Terah took his family out of their homeland in order to enter the Promise Land, but stopped short and settled in Haran. Perhaps this indicates he also stopped short and settled, spiritually. However, on the positive side, perhaps he also deposited a vision for the Promise Land in Abraham's spirit that God later awakened.

Sarah is a Spiritual Mother

Scripture also indicates that Sarah is a spiritual mother. 1 Peter 3:6 says that women who imitate Sarah's faith **"become her children"**. Verses 1-5 elucidate the qualities that Sarah modeled – she remained submissive to her husband's headship even when he was disobedient to God, she was chaste and respectful, she had a gentle and quiet spirit, she hoped in God, and she overcame the temptation to be fearful.

Adam Became a Spiritual Father

Adam was a spiritual father, but it took over a century of walking with God after the fall for him to become one. At age 130, Adam finally matured to the point of being ready to pass on God's image in him to a son. Genesis 5:3 says:

"When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth."

This was the redemptive turning point in the ancient world.

The genealogies of Genesis 4 and 5 follow the primary representatives of two opposing family lines – Cain’s line, through which Satan’s kingdom advanced, and Seth’s line, through which God’s kingdom advanced. Satan taught Cain’s descendants things like polygamy (Gen 4:19) and weaponry (Gen 4:22), whereas Seth’s line would eventually bring forth Enoch, who walked with God so closely he was translated straight to heaven, and Noah, through whom God preached righteousness to an evil generation (2 Peter 2:5) and started humanity again after the flood.

Men and Women Help Each Other Become Spiritual Parents

Men often feel more drawn to impact the world outside their homes while women feel more drawn to impact the world inside their homes. This difference is by God’s design. It helps them become spiritual mothers and fathers.

When a husband and wife walk through life together with Christ, they take on each other’s positive traits and refine each other’s negative ones. They learn to combine the tenderness of family relationships with godly ambition for making a broader impact. Their vision is not limited only to biological family or to outside-the-home pursuits. Instead, it becomes both. It grows into a vision for their eternal family.

Delayed Parenthood

If you are a Christian couple that desires to live fully for the Lord and are having trouble getting pregnant, it may well be that God wants to do something new in your generational line and He is maturing you to the point of being ready to be spiritual parents to your children. He is making you wait, just as He did for Abraham and Sarah with their son Isaac, or the way He did for Adam and Eve with their son Seth, or the way He did for Hannah with her son Samuel, or the way He did for Zacharias and Elizabeth with their son John the Baptist. Perhaps he is being careful not to entrust a great responsibility to you prematurely. Perhaps He is patiently preparing you to make an impact that will echo for generations to come.

Next

How can we learn from our parents’ mistakes without becoming critical of them? How can we help our children to overcome in areas we struggled in? We’ll find out in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5 – THE NEXT GENERATION

When I was a boy, I once told my dad I wanted to be just like him when I grew up. He replied that he was glad I wanted to be like him, but he actually wanted to help me become an even better man than him, just like his dad had done for him. He said every generation of parents should help their children become better than they were. Decades later, I reflected on my dad's statement and thought that this was a biblical principle.

Later I will devote three chapters to studying specific examples of this principle in scripture. But for now, consider the concept of parents giving their children an inheritance, which is found throughout the Old Testament (ex. Number 26:55, 33:54, Proverbs 13:22, 19:14). Overtly, such passages usually refer to land, homes, silver, gold, livestock, or businesses. However, much of what we see in the Old Testament is a picture of a spiritual principle. Inheritances are no exception. The fact that scripture consistently places a high value on physical inheritances is a sign of how much God esteems spiritual inheritances.

Consider how inheritance works. Parents spend many years laboring and accumulating. Then, when the inheritance is passed, the children reap the benefits. The parent's finishing point is the child's starting point. Then, if the child stewards it wisely, it will increase even more before being passed to the grandchildren.

The inheritance principle applies both to overcoming evil strongholds and to establishing righteous ones. A parent's role is to pass on what he or she learned through years of spiritual growth and labor. This way, it will be natural for their sons and daughters to walk in that same victory from an earlier age and they will be poised to go on and take even more ground as an inheritance for the next generation.

God Requires Humility from Both Sides

Whenever two groups relate to one another, the only way for them to receive the full blessing that God wants to impart is for both to exercise humility. This is true of two nations, two ethnic groups, two genders, or two generations. Let's talk about what this looks like with two generations.

Sometimes members of an older generation must have the humility to recognize members of a younger generation are building on the foundation they laid and celebrate it. If God entrusts them with wisdom or influence, the older generation should cheer them on rather than becoming critical or resentful. At the same time, the younger generation must recognize that their success would not be possible if the older generation had not laid the foundation for it. They also must recognize they will not be able to steward their gifts wisely without honoring the older generation, submitting to their authority, and acknowledging their need for shepherding.

Spiritual gifts do not equal character. Anointing does not equal maturity. Biblical insight does not equal faithfulness. No matter how much of these things God entrusts to a younger generation, they will still desperately need the character, faithfulness, and maturity that is modeled and passed down from spiritual fathers and mothers.

Psalms 145:4 says, **“One generation shall praise Your works to another, and shall declare Your mighty acts.”** Notice it doesn’t say one generation shall praise God’s works to the *next* – it says **“another”**. It goes both ways. Both parents and children declare what God has done or is doing in their generation and both are edified.

One of the most well-loved Christian books of the Baby-Boomer generation is *The Mystery of Marriage*. The author, Mike Mason, was a recent seminary graduate and had been married only a short time when he wrote the book. His mentor, renowned theologian J.I. Packer, stated in the book’s forward that he would have counseled Mike against writing it since there were already many marriage books written by much more qualified and experienced individuals. He went on to thank God that Mason never asked his advice because it would have been to the detriment of the entire body of Christ if he had.

Here is a picture that comes to my mind when I think about my job as a father. There is a plateau in front of me that is too high for me to reach. Instead, I help my children climb up onto my shoulders and stand up so that they can reach the edge and climb onto it. Then they reach down and pull me up. First they need me. Then I need them. Together, we reach the place God is calling us to.

Satanic Opposition

Satan hates spiritual inheritances and does everything in his power to destroy them. One way he does this is by tempting parents and children to take offense or become resentful of one another.

If one generation begins to build, the enemy tries to sow pride or criticism in both sides. He entices Christian parents and leaders to believe they are the standard of biblical Christianity and their children would do well to become just like them. He entices younger believers to think the older generation is stuck in their ways, rigid, and unwilling to receive what God is doing in the present. If Satan creates a generational divide, it can greatly undermine the power and longevity of what God is doing.

Parents Initiate Reconciliation

Malachi 4:6 says, **“He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers.”** Notice the order. The parents’ hearts shift first, then the children’s.

Whenever there is a relational rift, those who are more mature are the first to initiate reconciliation. They are the first to humble themselves, ask forgiveness, and extend

forgiveness. Since parents are older and wiser than their children, they should be the first to take responsibility for their part.

No matter how pure our intentions are as parents, we are not perfect. We have all misrepresented God many times. Here's my encouragement to parents of embittered adult children: If you knew everything back then that you know now, you would have done some things differently, right? Then tell your children. Explain to them what you wish you would have done better, even if you didn't have the capacity at the time. Apologize if it's appropriate. It doesn't mean you should feel ashamed, nor does it absolve them from their contribution to the divide. But it may validate some of what they are feeling and begin to bridge the gap. It may also help them begin to see their part. It may help them see where they had unrealistic expectations of you. In any event, let reconciliation start with you.

Seeing Our Parents' Blind Spots

One way God gives a new generation grace to build is by allowing them to see the blind spots and shortcomings of the previous generation. This is because He wants them to learn from their parents' mistakes. But with this vision comes a choice. Will we respond with humility or pride? Will we choose honor or criticism?

If children admit they could fall prey to similar vices and seek God's grace to overcome them, then He will give them the grace they need. However, if they believe they are better than their parents and could never repeat their mistakes, God's grace will not be available to them. They will either fall in similar ways or become ensnared in self-righteousness, distancing themselves from Christ.

Likewise, if children choose to honor what their parents did right, God will help them build upon the good parts of the foundation they received. However, if children criticize their parents for what they did wrong, they invite the accuser's presence into their lives and bring a curse on themselves. (This will be discussed more in the next chapter.)

There is a difference between *criticism* and *acknowledgment*. We should certainly *acknowledge* what our parents did wrong and how it affected us (potentially a long process). This way we can forgive them, experience healing through God and his people, and learn from their mistakes. However, we should not *criticize* them because criticism is rooted in pride. At the heart of criticism is the false belief that I could never do the same things my parents did because I am better than them. This is a deception. The truth is that we are all far more dependent on God's grace than we realize. The perfect combination of wounds, weaknesses, and temptations is all that stands between us and the sins we think we could never commit.

Even though seeing our parents' shortcomings can help us to do better for our children, we should always keep three things in mind:

- 1) Many of our parents did the best they could with what they received from their parents.

- 2) One day our children will experience the same thing with us. They will see all the ways we fell desperately short. Therefore, we should give our parents all the grace and understanding we hope to one day receive from our children. We will reap what we sow.
- 3) Even though we begin to see our parents' blind spots as we move into adulthood, they still see ours too. They are familiar with our personalities, strengths, and weaknesses. When we were growing up, God gave them grace to shepherd us and it did not suddenly disappear when we became adults. Their input is still valuable and could save us from costly mistakes.

When parents spend their whole lives laboring for a spiritual inheritance to pass on to their children, it's easy for children to take it for granted since they haven't known anything different. But God sees the years of struggle that went into laying that foundation. He does not forget their labor when they stand before His judgment seat and are assigned their eternal rewards.

My Testimony

Sometimes younger Christians think they are building when they are really just falling into deception. Younger Christians should recognize that older Christians have seen many different churches, leaders, movements, and doctrines come and go over the course of their lives. They've seen the pitfalls. They've seen people go after all kinds of deception and heresy. They've seen people chase after spiritual gifts and experiences only to abandon simple devotion to Christ. They've seen people zealously accumulate Bible knowledge only to become proud and self-righteous. They've seen people start out white hot, gradually become lukewarm, and then fall away completely. If they know anything, they know this: Long-term faithfulness is rare indeed.

In my early adult years, I became involved in a ministry unlike anything I had grown up around. All the head knowledge I accumulated growing up in my local church seemed to become real for the first time. I read the Bible voraciously for hours. I worshipped for hours and wept much of the time. I prayed for hours about everyone and everything I could think of. I went downtown and witnessed to people in my free time because I felt such a burden for the lost. I could not imagine wanting to do anything but serve the Lord for the rest of my life.

This season in my life lasted for about a year. Although it was largely positive, it was not perfect, and some of the seeds that were sown into my heart paved the way for me to later become involved in another ministry that was "off" in very serious ways. Many people in my life tried to warn me of the red flags they saw, including my wife, my parents, my in-laws, my pastor, friends, and parents of friends. However, because I did not think they understood what I had experienced at the first ministry, I did not consider their advice valuable. My unwillingness to listen to them led me down a path that nearly destroyed my marriage, my calling, and

possibly my soul. The only thing that saved me was the prayers, longsuffering, and forgiveness of the very people whose counsel I confidently rejected.

How We Define Normal

When we are born into a family, whatever our parents are like, that is our definition of *normal*. As we get older we are gradually exposed to other views and values, but still mostly see them as *different* and ourselves as *normal*. Finally, when we get older still, we realize there is no single standard of normalcy. Every family is different.

We also start to realize our parents made many mistakes. This can be painful and shocking since we once accepted everything they did and said as truth. We can feel misled and find it difficult to forgive them.

It is the same with our spiritual family. When we first get saved our perspective of normal Christianity (including doctrines, worship style, preaching style, culture of fellowship, outreach, etc...) is formed by our first experiences. The culture of our home church is *normal* and other churches and denominations are *different*. As we mature, we may begin to recognize blind spots, imbalances, and shortcomings of our home church. We may see areas where our church values its own traditions more than what the Bible teaches.

When those in authority disappoint us we can either become bitter or grow stronger. If we forgive them, remain humble about our own potential for mistakes, and depend on God for help, we can grow stronger. We can take the good we got, reject the bad, and seek out other influences. We can look for other mentors or ministries to supplement what we received from our parents or home church. If it is appropriate, we can humbly offer to help those over us course-correct.

A Dream

Once I had a dream in which I was praying for help to be a godly parent. I suddenly had an overwhelming sense of how far they could go if I gave them a good foundation and they were faithful to build on it. It was much farther than I realized. I felt like I was standing at the base of a mountain, looking up at them.

At the same time, I felt the greatest plateau I could hope to reach was feeble compared to what was possible for them. This made me so sorrowful I began to weep. Through my tears, I added to my prayer, saying, *"...I also pray that I could at least be great in my own generation."* When I said this, I heard the Lord's voice reply, *"Whoever wants to be great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wants to be first shall be your slave."*

When He said this, I realized that the honor of serving the next generation so they could build on the foundation I gave them was the very greatness I was asking for. I also remembered God judges us according to how faithfully we steward what we were given, including the foundations we received from our parents and early influences.

Next

The command to honor our parents is one of the most repeated commands of scripture, yet it is one of the most underemphasized today. As we will find out, even our very lives and the survival of our nation depend on our response to it.

CHAPTER 6 – HONORING PARENTS

I wrote earlier that parents are literally their children's creators. This is a position of intrinsic honor. Therefore, scripture commands children to honor their parents even when they steward their roles imperfectly.

Honoring parents is so important to God that it is the first of the Ten Commandments He gave for how human beings relate to one another (Exodus 20:12). Further, He connected it to personal and national lifespan and blessing (Deuteronomy 5:16). It is not even a slight exaggeration to say that the survival of a nation depends on Christians' willingness to honor their parents since Christians are a nation's spiritual gatekeepers.

Correspondingly, Romans 1 lists disobedience to parents as one of the signs that signal the final breakdown of a civilization given **"over to a depraved mind"** and against which **"the wrath of God is revealed."** Likewise, 2 Timothy 3:2 lists disobedience to parents as one of the primary sins of the last days that contributes to the times being so difficult. Finally, Malachi 4:6 says the breakdown of relationships between fathers and children brings a curse on the land.

Movies and television today encourage children to rebel against their parents. They instill the mindset that parents are stupid, their boundaries are oppressive, and their counsel is worthless. A large portion of the upcoming generation has been indoctrinated with this reasoning. Because parents represent God's authority, this also teaches children rebellion toward God. It is no wonder the Bible lists phrases like **"ungrateful"**, **"without understanding"**, and **"haters of God"** alongside **"disobedient to parents"** (2 Timothy 3).

The command to honor parents is so important that New Testament writers directly quoted it six times (Matthew 15:4, 19:19, Mark 7:10, 10:19, Luke 18:20, Ephesians 5:2), more than any other commandment. One practical way to honor parents the Bible delineates is in the area of financial provision. Jesus harshly rebuked the Pharisees for promulgating a tradition of prioritizing offerings over helping one's parents (Matthew 15:3-6). Likewise, Paul stated that anyone who does not provide for his own household (the context specifically highlights elderly widows) has denied the faith (1 Timothy 5:8). Other ways to honor parents include asking their advice, including them in our lives, thanking them for what they did well in raising us (either verbally or through writing), and forgiving them in our own hearts for where they fell short.

It is not an exaggeration to say that an older person knows more than a younger person can possibly imagine. This is because in life there is no replacement for firsthand experience. A child cannot possibly understand everything an adult knows. A single person cannot understand everything a married person knows. A childless person cannot understand everything a parent knows. An entry-level professional cannot understand everything an accomplished retiree in the same field knows. Someone who has never experienced a severe illness, divorce, the death of a loved one, or the estrangement of a child cannot understand everything that is known by someone who has.

Therefore, a practical way to honor parents is to ask them what they've learned. They have been there before. They have learned by trial and error. They have made mistakes and they have had successes. They may have wisdom we never thought of. They may see pitfalls we never considered. We don't have to agree with all their perspectives or share all their beliefs, but they still have valuable insight to impart simply by virtue of experience.

A Dream

Once I went through a painful disagreement with my parents. Afterward, I felt very critical of them for not understanding me or the situation we disagreed about. I struggled with anger and criticism every day for months.

Then one night I had a dream. In the dream, I became sick and was about to die a premature death. The Lord put me on a stretcher and loaded me into the back of an ambulance to take me to heaven. I was filled with peace and joy. I couldn't wait to arrive.

Knowing my thoughts, the Lord acknowledged my excitement, but then gave a word of warning about what I would experience when I stood before His Judgment Seat, saying, *"However, you will be judged for the grief you caused your parents."* When He said this, I suddenly felt immense grief. I realized I was about to experience the pain I had caused them and deeply regret some of my choices. Then I woke up.

As I processed the dream with the Lord, I felt Him show me that even though they had been partly mistaken about the situation, they had also been right about some things. I also felt Him show me that our disagreement had been more painful for them than it was for me. This is because the love they felt for me was greater than I could imagine since I did not have children at that time. Even though they did not interpret the situation completely accurately, they were pure in their motives.

This experience helped me overcome my struggle with criticism. Also, dreaming about dying prematurely was a sobering reminder of the connection in the Bible between honoring parents and living a long life.

Biblical Examples of Needing the Father's Blessing

There are many, many examples in scripture of men and women needing the blessing, covering, or provision of their parents (both biological and spiritual) in order to fulfill their calling. Here are a few:

- In Genesis 26, Isaac needed to unstop the wells of his father Abraham before he could be established and fruitful in the land God had given him. The wells in this passage symbolized *spiritual* wells or *living* water. Unstopping them symbolized Isaac recovering the spiritual legacy Abraham had passed down to him.

- In Genesis 27, even though Jacob lied about his identity, God still anointed Isaac to bestow a prophetic blessing on his son's life, thus honoring his role as Jacob's father. Jacob, in turn, blessed each of the sons of Joseph before he passed away (Hebrews 11:21).
- Moses was possibly spared from premature burnout because he listened to his father-in-law Jethro's counsel in Exodus 18.
- Ruth fulfilled her destiny in God by honoring her mother-in-law Naomi and remaining by her side through a bleak and desperate season.
- Solomon's wisdom and the greatness of Israel under his rule were all built upon the foundation that David laid for him.
- Elisha walked in a powerful anointing only because he received a double portion of his spiritual father Elijah's mantle.
- God equipped John the Baptist for his calling by entrusting him into the hands of righteous Zacharias and Elizabeth.
- Jesus was prepared for His destiny through Mary and Joseph's stewardship of Him. God also honored Mary's role in Jesus' life by essentially letting her determine the timing and setting of the beginning of His supernatural ministry (John 2).

A Warning from Noah's Life

Genesis chapter 9 contains an example of how serious the issue of honoring our parents is. Noah's sons heard him preach righteousness and prophesy judgment for many decades and then they saw the prophecy fulfilled. They knew he was God's chosen man to repopulate the earth. Their father was not perfect, but they knew God's favor was with him and he deserved their honor.

Sometime after the flood subsided, Noah planted a vineyard, made some wine, became drunk, and fell asleep naked. Aware of what his father had done, Ham looked upon his father's nakedness, and then told his two brothers, Shem and Japheth. By contrast, Shem and Japheth refused to look on their father's nakedness, but walked into his tent backward and covered him with a garment. These were all symbolic actions. In his heart, Ham wanted to expose and accuse his father's failure, while Shem and Japheth sought to honor Noah by covering over his sin.

When Noah awoke, he declared a prophetic blessing over Shem and Japheth and a curse upon Ham's son Canaan, who went on to father one of the wickedest civilizations of the ancient world. Ham dishonoring his father echoed through his family line for generations to come. The

same principle can affect *our* lives and family lines. How we respond to our parents' mistakes can impact the extent to which both we and our descendants are either cursed or blessed.

Next

Sometimes we must honor our parents even though we cannot follow their counsel. In the next chapter, we will learn what scripture has to say about situations like this.

CHAPTER 7 – FAMILY OPPOSITION

A commonly overlooked fact of scripture is that most of what Jesus said about the influence of biological family members in a young person's life once they reach the age of independence was not positive. Here are some examples:

“And He said to another, ‘Follow Me.’ But he said, ‘Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father.’ But He said to him, ‘Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God.’ Another also said, ‘I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home.’ But Jesus said to him, “No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:59-62)

For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household. He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of me...” (Matthew 10:35-37, repeated in Luke 12:53)

“You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends...” (Luke 21:16)

Jesus spoke these words primarily to people who came from devout Israelite families who believed in the true God and His written word. If these statements applied to Israelites in Jesus' day, they can also apply to Christians today.

For some Christians, family opposition is the greatest obstacle they will ever face to obeying God's call on their lives. We are born craving acceptance from our parents. They represent God to us. Our understanding of right and wrong is formed by their approval or disapproval. This tremendous influence does not suddenly disappear when we reach adulthood. Therefore, obeying God when it goes against our parents' wishes can feel like rebellion or sin.

Christians who grew up in Muslim, Buddhist, or Jewish families and then converted understand the price of following Christ. Many are completely rejected as outcasts. Some are even threatened with death. Christians today should understand it is possible to experience similar, if less extreme, shunning for following Christ even if they were raised in Christian homes. We live in a lukewarm generation. It is possible for Christian parents (or pastors and other long-term influencers) to be threatened or offended when their young adult children pursue a calling that is different than what they envisioned.

One older couple at my church took a vehement stand against their son and daughter-in-law becoming missionaries in a dangerous part of the world for fear of their safety. They wouldn't even consider that it could be God's hand leading them. The pastor finally counseled them that they had no right to hold their children back from God's will, if this was it, because they didn't belong to them – they belonged to Him. Similarly, the leader of a marriage-and-family ministry

said the number one obstacle young people face when becoming a part of their ministry is opposition from their Christian parents. The parents don't like the stigma and uncertainty associated with having to raise support as missionaries.

Another source of opposition is that some Christians are very dogmatic in their devotion to a particular set of doctrines or a denomination. Therefore, they treat going to another church/denomination or embracing different doctrines (other than the non-negotiable doctrines of the faith) almost as if they had converted to another religion.

I read the testimony of one man who grew up in a church with very formal, ritualistic services. As a result, Christ never seemed personal or approachable to him. In his teenage years, a friend invited him to a church with a friendlier atmosphere, genuine heart-felt worship, and practical in-depth teaching about living in relationship with God. Without criticizing, he switched churches and began to pursue God passionately. However, this offended his pastor and parents so much that he was eventually ostracized from his family.

Most Christian parents sincerely want what is best for their children. However, Christian parents' counsel is sometimes more a reflection of their own values than God's kingdom. They may be more concerned with their children's financial security, social status, geographic proximity, physical safety, or normal family life than whether they truly serve God with all their hearts.

No Debt Other Than Honor

Children owe their parents honor, but they don't owe them a life lived the way their parents envisioned. Nor do they owe them repayment for all the sacrifices they made. Parents sacrificing for their children is not an option; it is a command and a responsibility. It is their duty before God.

There is a scene from a classic movie, *Look Who's Coming to Dinner*, that illustrates this well. In a heated exchange, the father reminds the son of all the sacrifices he made for him. However, the son does not accept this as grounds that he must choose the life his father wants for him:

Father: *You know how far I carried that [mail] bag in 30 years? 75,000 miles! And mowing lawns in the dark so you wouldn't have to be stoking furnaces and could bear down on the books. There were things your mother should have had that she insisted go for you. And I don't mean fancy things. I mean a decent coat. A lousy coat! And you're gonna tell me that means nothing to you and you could break your mother's heart?*

Son: *Let me tell you something. I owe you nothing. If you carried that bag a million miles you did what you were supposed to do because you brought me into this world and from that day you owed me everything you could ever do for me, like I will owe my son if I ever have another. But you don't own me. You can't... try to get me to live my life*

according to your rules... You're my father. I'm your son. I love you. I always have and I always will.

Godly Counsel

Sometimes, giving godly counsel requires more than biblical knowledge or life experience. Sometimes it requires having the Lord's perspective of the specific situation, which may be contrary to human reasoning since the Lord sometimes asks us to trust Him by faith, not fully understanding His reasons or how everything will work out (ex. Proverbs 3:5). When this is the case, some parents may actually be the least qualified to give godly counsel because they have an instinctive, negative response to something that seems dangerous, foolish, or doesn't fit into accepted family views.

Even in godly families, sometimes God leads adult children into things their parents did not envision for them. Here are two possible reasons God might do this:

- 1) First, He wants to set adult children free from needing their parents' approval.
- 2) Second, He wants to help parents relinquish control and influence over their children's lives unless asked for input.

Relinquishing influence can be a difficult and grief-filled process. I recently heard one pastor say that learning to relate to their adult children was more difficult for him and his wife than the "terrible twos". Involved parents invest about twenty years continuously guiding the course of their children's lives. When children become fully independent, there is a death that takes place – the death of one role and the birth of another much less prominent one.

Jesus Modelled This

Jesus did not only *speak* about the possible need for young adults to go against the urgings of their parents and family members – He modeled it. In Mark 3:20-35, Jesus came to his hometown to minister. Because His message and ministry were so different from what His mother and brothers expected, they thought He literally had lost His senses. They tried to take Him into custody, but Jesus wouldn't allow them to have access to Him. When others told Him they wanted to see Him, He replied: **"Who are My mother and My brothers?"** Then, looking around at His disciples, He said, **"Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother."**

This must have been a deeply painful moment for Jesus. Imagine the bond between Jesus and Mary. Mary was a godly woman who only wanted the best for Him. Jesus knew this. He was likely very close with His siblings as well. Since He was the oldest, He probably felt protective and responsible for them. Even so, Jesus knew there could be no competing loyalties contending with His devotion to obey the Father. He also knew the best thing for Mary and His brothers in the long term was to fulfill His calling, even though it meant severing ties with them in the short term.

Mary was even explicitly warned that she would be tempted to take offense at Jesus and oppose Him. In Luke 2:34-35, just after Jesus was born, Simeon prophesied to her, saying:

“Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed—and a sword will pierce even your own soul—to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

Notice how Simeon abruptly turned the attention to Mary’s soul after saying Jesus was going to be opposed. Some have interpreted Mary’s soul being pierced as referring to the pain she felt when Jesus was crucified. But the context is clearly about the spiritual condition of people’s hearts being exposed by Jesus’ ministry, as Mary’s was when she took offense and opposed Him.

In addition to Mary and His brothers thinking He had lost His senses in Mark 3, His brothers mocked Him for thinking He was doing special works from God (John 7:3-5), and His entire hometown took offense at Him (Matthew 13:54-58, Mark 6:1-6).

There are seasons when we may need to shift our paradigm for *family*. Those who encourage us to fulfill God’s call on our lives are like family members for that season. Jesus recognized that God had placed the disciples in His life during that season so that they could be like family to Him. This is why He said of His disciples, **“For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother.”** This is also why He was able to say to them near the end of His life, **“You are those who have stood by Me in My trials.”** (Luke 22:28)

Opposition from Spiritual Parents

Opposition can come from spiritual parents, as well as biological parents. One example from the gospels stands out. When some of the spiritual sons of the Pharisees began to follow Jesus, He said to them in Luke 11:19:

“And if I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? So they will be your judges.”

The Pharisees ended up accusing the very ones they once taught and shepherded.

There are examples of this in church history as well. For example, under Martin Luther’s leadership, millions of reformists lost their lives or were imprisoned by Roman Catholics for embracing fundamental biblical truths such as individual salvation by grace, not by works, and the right of every Christian to read the Bible in his own language. However, not long after this, the Lutherans turned around and treated Anabaptists the same way. Martin Luther publicly supported imprisonment and execution of Anabaptists because, among other doctrinal disagreements, they denied the validity of infant baptism.

Similarly, Anglicans were persecuted by Catholics receiving some reformation truths, but then turned around and persecuted Methodists and Baptists for inviting personal responses to the gospel and for preaching without a license from the state. Later, Pentecostals came under persecution from previously established denominations for teaching the modern-day operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Ridicule

Ridicule by friends, family members, and other believers is one of the enemy's most reliable weapons for deterring people from following the Lord's call. In fact, it is present in the lives of many of the men God used in scripture, including many who were born into believing families. Here are some examples:

- Cain killed Abel because he was jealous of Abel's intimacy with the Lord. (Genesis 4)
- Joseph's parents and brothers took offense at the dreams the Lord gave him about his destiny and his brothers sold him into slavery because of jealousy. (Genesis 37)
- Jacob's father-in-law for years tried to delay and distract him from taking his inheritance in the Promise Land. (Genesis 29-31)
- Gideon's family members almost killed him for tearing down his father's idols. (Judges 6:35-31)
- David's oldest brother falsely accused him of wickedness just before the moment when God would exalt him before the eyes of the whole nation. (1 Samuel 17:28)
- David's mother and father forsook him. (Psalms 27:10)
- Solomon's brother Adonijah tried to steal the throne from him just before he was crowned. (1 Kings 1)
- Jeremiah's brothers and father dealt treacherously with him when he prophesied of Israel's coming judgment. (Jeremiah 12:6)
- Mary Magdalene was criticized by other believers for prioritizing time with Christ over domestic expectations (Luke 10), for an extravagant act of worship (John 12, Mark 14, and Matthew 26), and for truthfully testifying of Christ's resurrection (Mark 16:11, Luke 24:11).

Each of these saints was great in the sight of God. The ridicule they endured is recorded, in part, so that we will be prepared for the possibility that we too may be ridiculed by friends or family members for following the Lord.

On the other hand, Samuel, Moses, Joshua, and John the Baptist were also great in God's sight and, as far as we know, had very supportive families. If we have families that are supportive of us living fully surrendered to Christ, whatever the cost, we can be truly thankful. If not, don't be deterred. Graciously accept their disapproval and continue following the Lord. It is possible to honor our parents even when we do not follow their counsel. In fact, Jesus began His ministry by honoring His mother and His brothers. He performed His first miracle in response to Mary's entreaty (John 2:5) and kept her and His brothers present right alongside His disciples at the beginning of His ministry in the days they followed (John 2:12).

If we need to reject our parents' counsel, we can do it humbly. We could say something like:

"Honestly, you may be right and I may be wrong about this. But after seeking the Lord and hearing input from godly people I trust, I still have this conviction. If it's wrong, at least my conscience is clean before God. He can cover me and redeem this decision if it is a misstep. Please just continue to pray for me. Thank you for caring so much about my future."

Marriage teaches us to Leave Our Parents

Here is a final thought. In Matthew 19:4-5, Jesus said:

"He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife...'"

In a way, marriage teaches us how to follow Christ because both involve laying down every relationship that hinders devotion to *this* relationship. Many young adults, at one time or another, experience pressure to choose their parent's or in-law's wishes over their spouse's. Therefore, marriage teaches us to graciously accept that sometimes family members will not like or agree with our decisions and that is okay. It teaches us to leave father and mother and become whole-heartedly devoted to another.

Next

Moses is known for many positive things, but the Bible also unapologetically records his failures as a husband and father. We'll examine these mistakes in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 8 – MOSES' FAILURES

If there was ever a man who appeared to be indispensable to God's purposes in the Old Testament, it was Moses. After an 80-year preparation process, God appeared to Moses in a supernatural encounter, gave him miraculous powers, and commissioned Him to lead God's people out of bondage (Exodus 3 & 4). He went on to prophesy the plagues of Egypt, part the Red Sea, receive the Ten Commandments, habitually speak with God face to face, and perform many other incredible works. He was God's greatest ambassador since Abraham and it is doubtful whether there has been another quite like him since.

And yet, just after his commission, before he even reached Egypt, God was ready to put Moses to death. Why? What could Moses possibly have done to provoke such anger? Moses failed as a father. Exodus 4:24-26 says:

"Now it came about at the lodging place on the way that the Lord met him and sought to put him to death. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and threw it at Moses' feet, and she said, 'You are indeed a bridegroom of blood to me.' So He let him alone."

God sought to put Moses to death because he had not circumcised his son, Gershom. But was God really concerned about Gershom's foreskin? No, this was about something deeper. Moses' outward negligence pointed to the fact that he did not *spiritually* circumcise Gershom. He was not an engaged father. (Moses himself taught that outward circumcision points to having a circumcised heart in Deuteronomy 30:6.) This is an incredible reminder of the value God places on family. Even though millions of people were going to be affected by Moses' ministry, God almost ended it before it even began because of his failure in this one crucial area.

This may seem like a strategically foolish move by God unless we realize this key concept: Moses' call to fatherhood was the foundation of his authority. Look at what God said to him immediately before almost putting him to death (in verses 22-23):

"Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord, 'Israel is My son, My firstborn. So I said to you, 'Let My son go that he may serve Me'; but you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will kill your son, your firstborn.'"

Notice how God framed everything He was planning to do through Moses in the context of fatherhood. Israel was God's firstborn son. Pharaoh would refuse to let *God's* firstborn son go free. Therefore, God would kill *Pharaoh's* firstborn son.

This is why fatherhood was the foundation of Moses' authority as Israel's deliverer. How could Moses honestly identify with the Father's love for His firstborn son, Israel, if he was not even fathering his own firstborn son? How could Moses feel compassion and brokenness when he

told Pharaoh his hard heart would cost him the life of his firstborn son, and countless other Egyptian sons, if he was not fathering his own firstborn son?

The apostle Paul affirmed the vital connection between fatherhood and ministry in 1 Timothy 3:5, saying, “**...if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?**” The only thing that saved Moses was his wife Zipporah intervening and fulfilling his responsibility for him. She saw that Moses’ negligence was about to cost him his life. She also saw what it was doing to Gershom. The fact that she circumcised Gershom, I believe, indicates that she also took it upon herself to spiritually circumcise him.

Moses’ Troubled Marriage

The Bible seems to draw a contrast between Moses’ relationship with Zipporah and his relationship with Zipporah’s father Jethro. Moses treated Jethro with respect. When God commanded Moses to go to Egypt, he asked for Jethro’s permission. By contrast, all scripture says about Zipporah’s role in this decision is: “**So Moses took his wife and sons and mounted them on a donkey, and returned to the land of Egypt.**” (Exodus 4:20) Zipporah was made to take her children, leave her home and her family, move to a new nation, and it appears she wasn’t even consulted in the decision. On top of this, Moses was so consumed with his divine mandate that he neglected to be a father. It wasn’t long before Zipporah separated from Moses and took their children.

Later, in Exodus 18, Jethro brought Zipporah and the children to visit Moses in the wilderness. Again, Moses treated Jethro with great respect. He bowed down before him and shared everything the Lord had done in Egypt. He also listened to Jethro’s counsel to delegate some of his responsibilities and stop taking on so much. By contrast, it is unclear whether Zipporah was even willing to see Moses. Nothing in scripture indicates that Moses treated Zipporah as a partner or valued her input.

God entrusted Moses with immense responsibility outside his home. Unfortunately, he allowed the weight of it to dominate his life and he became unavailable to the ones who needed him most. If Moses had been intentional to invest in his family, I believe he would have found in Zipporah a wise, loving partner who could help bear his burdens. God gave Moses a helper, but instead he tried to do it alone.

It is well worth noting that Moses never fulfilled the greatest part of calling – leading Israel into the promise land (Numbers 20:12). Perhaps if he had been more open to Zipporah’s input, this would not have been the case. Perhaps he would have dealt more fully with his anger problem so that it didn’t resurface and disqualify him (Numbers 20:12). Perhaps he would have seen the wisdom of delegating some of his responsibilities to other leaders sooner so he didn’t exhaust himself (Exodus 18:14). With Zipporah’s and his children’s refining influence, perhaps Moses would have enjoyed a much longer, more glorious rule over Israel – especially since his eyes had not dimmed and his strength had not abated, even at 120 years old (Deuteronomy 34:7).

We Can Learn From Moses' Failures

Moses is one of the greatest saints in history, but he was not a perfect man. His mistakes are recorded in scripture for our sake, so we can learn from them. Does God take a father's responsibility to spiritually circumcise his children seriously? You bet He does. Is a great spiritual leader immune to destroying his marriage by not treating his wife as a partner? Or by taking on too much outside his home so that he can't be a present husband and father? Clearly not.

Other than our 1-on-1 relationship with God, nothing is more foundational to a man's life and ministry than his inside-the-home calling. If a man fails to lead his first disciples – his wife and children – can he really call his ministry a success? Just as God framed Moses' mandate in the context of fatherhood, how we steward our relationships inside the home is the foundation for our authority outside the home. If we impact millions for Christ, but fail with those closest to us, we fail with the more significant part.

What if Jesus had only ministered to the multitudes, but didn't devote himself to spiritually fathering the disciples and the women who were closest to Him? Most of the fruit of His ministry would have been lost since they were the ones who would carry His legacy forward for generations to come. The same is true of us. Our greatest eternal fruit is borne out of our closest relationships - family members and those we father or mother spiritually. Even though Moses failed with biological sons, he at least became a spiritual father to Joshua, who carried Moses' mantle into the Promise Land.

Next

Some of the Bible's most powerful lessons and warnings about raising children can be seen in Isaac and Rebekah's lives. What are they? We'll cover them in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 9 – ISAAC AND REBEKAH’S FAILURES

Isaac and Rebekah’s failures as parents contributed to one of their sons being lost for eternity and the other struggling with a debilitating stronghold for the majority of his life. They failed with Jacob and Esau in four ways:

- **They failed to cultivate their godly identities.** Jacob possessed intense spiritual ambition and hunger for God’s blessing; Esau had a gift for servanthood and covering the sins of others with mercy and forgiveness.
- **They failed to circumcise their carnal identities.** Jacob was full of selfish ambition; Esau tended toward spiritual apathy and abdication of personal responsibility.
- **They fueled rivalry and insecurity by choosing favorites.** Isaac favored Esau; Rebekah favored Jacob.
- **They undermined God’s values by esteeming superficial traits more than character.** Isaac esteemed Esau’s hunting ability; Rebekah esteemed Jacob’s peaceful, indoor-dwelling quality.

God gave multiple warnings and exhortations to help Isaac and Rebekah avoid these parental pitfalls, beginning during the twins’ pregnancy. Sadly, they all went unheeded. Here is how their story unfolded.

Pregnancy and Birth

In Genesis 25, Rebekah asked the Lord why the sons in her womb, Jacob and Esau, were struggling together. The Lord answered her, saying:

“Two nations are in your womb; and two peoples will be separated from your body; and one people shall be stronger than the other; and the older shall serve the younger.”

Although this prophecy was about nations, it also had implications for the boys’ personality types. Additionally, prophetic signs at Jacob and Esau’s birth gave further insight into their natures. When Esau was born, he was hairy like a garment and red all over; when Jacob was born, he grabbed Esau’s heel.

Esau

When God told Rebekah that the older son, Esau, would serve the younger, Jacob, He was pronouncing a blessing on both of them. This was not a curse on Esau as some have supposed; God *loved* Esau. He was affirming Esau’s gift of servanthood.

Almost every time the word “servant” is used in the Bible, it is either positive or neutral. In some cases, it is even equated with greatness (ex. Mathew 23:11). (An exception occurs in Noah’s Genesis 9 prophecy of Ham’s son Canaan, but unlike all other mentions, this mention is specifically called a “curse”.) Some have interpreted Romans 9:13, which says, **“Just as it is**

written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated’”, to mean that God did curse Esau and predetermined that he would stumble. However, Romans 9:13 is a quotation of Malachi 1:2-3, which was written over one thousand years after Jacob and Esau passed away and is clearly talking about the nations that descended from them, not Jacob and Esau themselves. Furthermore, the overarching context of Romans 9 is God’s sovereignty over nations, which is different than His activity in the lives of individuals.

What was the meaning of Esau being hairy like a garment and red all over? Two of the three times garments are mentioned in scripture prior to this, they are symbolic of a covering for sin – the garments of skin God gave to Adam and Eve, and the garment Shem and Japheth laid over Noah to cover his nakedness. Red also symbolizes forgiveness of sins since it is an allusion to the blood of Christ and, as Hebrews 9:22 says, **“without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness”**. These signs symbolized that Esau was self-sacrificial by nature, and had a gift for covering the sins of others through his willingness to forgive – something he would frequently need when dealing with Jacob.

Jacob

When Jacob was born, he grabbed Esau’s heel. This was a warning of the jealousy Jacob would have for Esau’s birthright and the temptation he would feel to supplant Esau’s position.

In contrast to Esau’s service gift, Jacob’s most prominent attribute was his intense spiritual ambition. He wanted God’s blessing at any cost. However, he was also self-serving, only interested in his *own* advancement. Esau, on the other hand, was relatively indifferent toward spiritual things, which is why he later sold his birthright for a single meal.

God’s Intent: Partners, not Rivals

Jacob and Esau’s gifts were meant to complement one another. Jacob’s influence could have helped Esau esteem God’s blessing, while Esau could have taught Jacob that it is God’s nature to serve others. God chose Jacob to be younger so he would learn that his inheritance came from God, not through man’s bestowal or through his own striving. And God chose Esau to be older because He knew Esau’s greatest challenge would be taking responsibility for his own relationship with God, since it was more natural for him to be a passive follower. Carrying the responsibilities of the oldest son would help him step up to this challenge.

Jacob and Esau were called to be a duo, to complement each other, like David and Jonathon or John and James. There is something very special and powerful when brothers walk together before the Lord in unity, just as it says in Psalm 133:1-2: **“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell in unity! It is like the precious oil [anointing] upon the head [Jesus]...”** Jesus is magnified and exalted through brothers walking in unity.

Had Esau not fallen away, perhaps God would have led him to *voluntarily* offer the position of family headship to Jacob, recognizing Jacob’s gift of spiritual zeal and his own gift of servanthood. Imagine how humbling it would have been for Jacob if Esau lovingly handed over

the inheritance he so desperately longed for. Imagine Esau promising to do everything he could to help Jacob lay ahold of God's blessing. Their hearts would have been bound together for life. Isn't this exactly what Jonathon, the legal heir to Saul's throne, promised to do for David?

I wonder how it might have played out. Perhaps when their father Isaac approached death, Esau would have told him he believed Jacob was meant to receive the primary birthright instead of him. Or perhaps they would have received their birthrights in the proper order, but the Spirit, speaking through Isaac, would have given the mantle of family headship to Jacob (which He did anyway) and Esau would have offered his support and approval.

Division

Despite the insights God gave Isaac and Rebekah, their parenting mistakes created a sharp division between Jacob and Esau. First, they chose favorites based on personal preference (Genesis 25:28), which likely fueled their rivalry and insecurity. Then, they esteemed superficial traits above character. Isaac affirmed Esau for being a good hunter while Rebekah affirmed Isaac for being a peaceful man who liked to dwell in tents (Genesis 25:27). This instilled a worldly value system instead of a kingdom value system. They likely felt pressure to seek their parents' affirmation more than God's.

Finally, in a life-defining moment for both brothers, Jacob coaxed Esau into trading away his birthright for a meal. Jacob's selfish ambition played off of Esau's apathy. Jacob then lied to his father about his identity (Genesis 25:31, 27:32) and went on to struggle with his stronghold for the majority of his life, never fully trusting God to bless him, thinking he needed to strive and deceive. Esau walked away from God completely.

Name and Nature

In the Bible, a person's *name* often points to his *nature*. That is why it is so significant when God changes someone's name – it symbolizes a change in their nature. Some examples of this are Abram becoming Abraham, Sarai becoming Sarah, Cephas becoming Peter, and Saul becoming Paul.

It is interesting that Esau was named by his parents after his godly nature, but then took on a new name after his carnal nature.

By contrast, Jacob was named by his parents for his carnal nature, but then God renamed him for his godly nature.

Isaac and Rebekah recognized Esau's self-sacrificing nature and affirmed it by naming him Esau, or *red*. However, after Esau traded his birthright, his name changed to Edom, which means *red of the earth*, which meant his sacrificial nature had been stained by worldly-mindedness. Without God directing his life, Esau's gift could only be used for worldly, temporal purposes and have no eternal impact.

Isaac and Rebekah made a terrible mistake in naming Jacob, or *one who supplants*, after his weakness. This reinforced his belief that he needed to strive and deceive to obtain God's blessing. However, in Genesis 32, God wrestled with Jacob all night and afterward changed his name, and nature, to *Israel*, saying he had **"striven with God and with men and prevailed."** (vs. 28) Because Jacob always turned *toward* God, instead of *away* from God as Esau had done, God was able to work on him even though his motives were all wrong. In the end, God overcame his carnal nature and bestowed on him the godly nature his parents failed to cultivate.

Conclusion

God tried to set Isaac and Rebekah up for success by giving them insight into their sons' makeups. With God's help, they could have shepherded the boys into their godly identities, circumcised their carnal identities, avoided choosing favorites, and affirmed their characters instead of superficial attributes. Instead, they did the opposite, which contributed to the eternal loss of one son and a lifelong character struggle for the other. This was a great tragedy, but it is recorded in scripture for our sake.

What does God think when He looks at our children? What does He think about their weaknesses? What does He think about their potential?

God identifies us according to our godly potential, not our weaknesses. When He spoke to Gideon through His angel (Judges 6:12), He called him a valiant warrior even though he was hiding in fear. When Jesus first met Nathaniel, He called him an Israelite **"in whom there was no deceit"** (John 2:47) even though he was cynical and hardened to the possibility of Jesus being the Messiah. When Ezekiel came to a valley filled with dry bones representing Israel's spiritual condition (Ezekiel 37), God saw the potential for an exceedingly great army and commanded Ezekiel to prophesy what it could become. Parents must treat their children in the same way. Children believe the messages parents send them about their identities and are shaped by them. Our words are their mirrors. Our affirmation creates their self-portraits.

Next

What is God's definition of success? How does it vary from the world's definition? What should parents teach their children about how to live successful lives? This is the topic of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 10 – THE RIGHT PRIORITIES

Many Christian parents place a strong emphasis on getting an education, finding a good job, starting a family, and making good money. However, all of these things are morally neutral. They only have eternal value if they are part of a life lived in a growing relationship with God.

If you doubt this, imagine a child who does well in school, gets a respectable, high-paying job, gets married, has well-behaved children and grandchildren, and spends his adult life happy and successful. Then he dies and goes to hell, unable to ever escape. Would he not gladly switch places, including switching lifetimes on earth, with a man who spent his life in poverty and loneliness but knew the Lord? We don't even have to speculate what the answer is. Jesus described a similar situation in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16.

My point is not to belittle the value of a career or a family, but that everything we do or have that doesn't have Christ at the center ultimately has no eternal value. That is the tragedy of idolatry. It takes wonderful, beautiful things that God created to bless us, and turns them into worthless things that disappear forever.

Making Converts Instead of Disciples

What would happen to a newborn baby if it didn't have any parents, but was left in the wilderness to fend for itself? Of course, it would quickly die. This is exactly what happens to a large number of newborn Christian converts made in the home and in the church. There are no spiritual fathers and mothers present so new converts are not being shepherded to maturity.

When Jesus departed, He did not command the apostles to make converts, but to **“make disciples... teaching them to observe all that I commanded you”** (Matthew 28:19-20). He also warned in Matthew 24:19, **“But woe to those who... are nursing babies in those days,”** which some have interpreted to mean, woe to those who allow their spiritual children to remain in immaturity. The overemphasis on making converts and under-emphasis on making disciples in families and churches is possibly the greatest tragedy of our generation.

The secularization of America has incredible momentum now. We can probably all think of multiple people in our lives, from teenagers to retirees, who once appeared to be strong believers, but have now either rejected the faith outright or have gradually adopted a worldview that disregards scripture. At the present rate, without revival, we are perhaps only a decade or two away from pure Christianity being overtly persecuted or even criminalized in America.

I believe this backslide is largely the result of false teaching that promises eternal security without repentance or perseverance. I wonder how many people falsely think they're going to heaven because they responded to altar call many years ago? Or how many parents falsely believe their wayward young adult children are not in any real danger because they prayed the sinner's pray as a child? Or worse still, how many people in the last few decades have breathed

their last breath, slipped into eternity expecting to enter heaven, but instead found themselves in darkness and torment?

I remember talking to a man who had been a “cultural Christian” his whole life, having grown up in the church and in a Christian home. As best I as could tell from our conversation, he never spent time with the Lord, never read the Bible, and was not connected to any church body. He had been divorced for many years and had become quite solitary. He said his philosophy for living was to only look out for himself because you can never count on anyone else. When I asked him if he had any religious beliefs, he quickly responded, *“Oh yes, Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior. I accepted Him when I was young.”*

God the Father

When I was in college, I interviewed for a summer job as a coach at a kids’ sports camp. One of the questions the interviewer asked me was, *“What do you think is parents’ number one priority when they drop their children off at one of our camps?”* I took a few guesses. *Make new friends? Get exercise? Learn teamwork and character? Learn athletic skills?* All wrong. Since I wasn’t yet a parent, I managed to overlook the obvious correct answer that every parent already knows. They wanted to know their children were *safe*. If that is true of human parents, how much more is it true of God the Father? There is nothing in the universe more important to God than the safety of His children.

How would you feel if your toddler wandered off in a crowded public area and suddenly was nowhere to be found? Imagine the panic! Imagine the fear! This is how God feels when one of his newborn children is in jeopardy of falling away. Several years ago, an international evangelistic crusade ministry estimated that about 80% of the people who gave their lives to Christ at one of their crusades were no longer walking with Him ten years later. This same phenomenon is happening to the majority of converts in American homes and churches. What on earth is happening?

Some would say those converts were once saved, but fell away and are now lost. Others would say they were never really saved to begin with – they were false converts. Others would say many are still saved without realizing it and they will return to conscious belief in time. What is the truth? Is it possible for a believer to fall away to the point of becoming lost or is a believer once saved always saved? What does the Bible say?

Every systematic theology book I’ve read at least acknowledges there are two perspectives on this issue. There are literally dozens of passages that can be interpreted to support each side. Let’s read a few from each side. First, here are some passages commonly used to support the view that it is possible for a person, once saved, to fall away from the Lord to the point of becoming lost again:

- Peter said in 2 Peter 2:20, **“For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again**

entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first.” (The Greek word used for *knowledge* is frequently used in scripture for a mature, saving knowledge of Christ. Examples include 2 Peter 1:3, 8, Ephesians 4:13, and 1 Corinthians 13:12.)

- The writer of Hebrews said in Hebrews 6:4-6, **“For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.”** (The Greek word used for *repentance* is almost always linked with saving faith in scripture. Examples include Matthew 3:2 and Acts 2:38.)
- Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:1-2, **“Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.”**
- James said in James 5:19-20, **“My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death...”**
- Jesus said in Matthew 24:12-13, **“Because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved.”** (This passage is referring to love *for God*, which unbelievers do not have to begin with.)

Additional passages used to support this view include:

- a) Salvation portrayed as depending on perseverance – Colossians 1:21-23, Romans 11:22, Hebrews 3:12-14, Hebrews 10:26-39, John 8:30–32, Revelation 3:5
- b) Parables depicting converts falling away unto eternal separation – Matthew 24:45-51, Matt 13:47-50, Matthew 13:20-21, John 15:5-6
- c) Statements made to believers warning against falling away unto spiritual death – 1 Timothy 4:16, Galatians 5:21, Philippians 2:12, Luke 12:4-12, Acts 20:28-30

By contrast, here are some passages commonly used to support the view that, once genuinely saved, a person can never be lost:

- Jesus said in John 6:39, **“This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day.”**
- Jesus said in John 10:28, **“I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand.”**
- Paul said in 2 Corinthians 1:21-22, **“Now He who establishes us with you and in Christ and anointed us is God, who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge.”**
- Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17, **“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”**
- Paul said in Ephesians 1:13, **“In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise...”**
- Paul wrote in Romans 8:38-39, **“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

I encourage you to prayerfully examine the wording of each of these passages for yourself, perhaps using an online lexicon to check the original meaning of keywords. I recommend using a word-for-word translation of the Bible such as NASB, KJ, or YLT since other phrase-for-phrase or thought-for-thought translations leave more room for translators to insert their own beliefs. I further encourage you not to assume your pastor or favorite author could not possibly be wrong on this issue since there are many reputable theologians on both sides.

I'll share my opinion. I believe the second set of passages emphasizes the faithfulness of God, while the first set emphasizes the free will of man. God's power to keep us is greater than Satan's power or the world's power to overtake us. No matter how badly we stumble or how far we fall, God never gives up on us or stops pursuing us. He can recover us to His kingdom if we are willing to be recovered. However, we really do have a choice. God did not create robots. He will not force us to remain a part of His kingdom if we really insist on living for ourselves or rejecting His mercy.

Analogous to Marriage

This does not mean a believer's salvation status waivers from one week to the next. Perhaps the most useful analogy for understanding our relationship with the Lord in this regard is marriage. A marriage can go through dry seasons. A marriage can even survive abuse, adultery, or separation. Even a marriage that ends in divorce can be reconciled if both partners are still

alive. However, if a husband and wife divorce and then one of them dies, the marriage can never be restored. In the same way, if a believer falls away to the point that he effectively divorces from the Lord and then dies in that condition, he is lost forever.

Some people get married very young with no one to mentor them. They don't have the maturity to persevere through trials. When things get hard they give up. This is like people who give their lives to the Lord because of the infatuation they experience in their early years with Him. However, they are not prepared to lay down their lives for Him so they leave when things become difficult.

Some marriages begin on a strong foundation but are ruined because of addictions or adultery. This is like people who begin strong in their spiritual journey but become entangled in idolatry or immorality and refuse to repent.

Some couples raise children together, but when the children leave they realize the marriage has become loveless and unfulfilling so they call it quits. This is like a believer who labors productively for many years caring for other believers or the lost, but loses his first love and ultimately turns away to live for himself.

Across the whole of Christendom, every imaginable combination has likely existed in terms of a believer's age and circumstances of his conversion, the longevity and devotion of his Christian walk, and the age and circumstances of his falling away. Since God judges the heart, I don't believe there is a clear-cut formula for determining at what point a believer crosses a line to become lost again. However, this does not mean such a line does not exist – it just means only God knows for sure when it has been crossed.

I think it is certainly possible for a Christian to seriously backslide or have major strongholds, yet still be saved. Likewise, I think it is possible for a person to intellectually believe all the right doctrines and have no glaring vices, but not really know God at all, perhaps because he unconsciously worships his own righteousness – like a modern Pharisee.

Some *Once-Saved-Always-Saved* advocates are fond of the expression, “*You can't lose what you didn't earn.*” This expression is irritating to me because it doesn't even make sense *as an illustration!* Could you possibly lose something someone gives you, say, as a birthday present or a Christmas present? Of course. Whether something is earned, purchased, or given has no effect whatsoever on whether it can be lost. Likewise, in my assessment of scripture, while salvation can never be earned, it can be lost.

What to Say to New Converts

If there are two perspectives of this issue and each view can be well-supported by various scriptures, why is this so rarely taught in Christian homes or from the pulpit? What is more important than an accurate assessment of one's standing with regard to salvation?

Do you remember the evangelistic crusade ministry I mentioned earlier? They routinely sent converts from their crusades to liberal churches, Roman Catholic churches, and even Jewish synagogues that did not even *feign an appearance* of sound biblical teaching or discipleship. Many of those new believers were doomed to fall away the day they got saved – like a newborn child left alone in the wilderness.

Many church leaders and parents have committed a perilous error by oversimplifying the salvation issue. *Just make a decision to receive Christ today and you can know you're going to heaven.* It's simply untrue. Some hear the gospel, respond with joy and repentance for a season, and then get sucked back into the world a year or two later, never to return. Others walk with God for decades, then gradually drift into permanent sin or a completely different worldview.

What if, instead, new converts were told something like this?

God will never leave you and He will always pursue a closer relationship with you. However, it is still your responsibility to remain in His care by drawing near to Him every day in prayer and in learning His word.

God is much stronger than Satan, but realize that the enemy does not give up trying to destroy your soul even after you are saved. Sometimes he attacks you openly and aggressively with overt sin; sometimes he works patiently over many, many years to draw you after idols or unbiblical beliefs.

God is not intimidated by the enemy and neither should you be, but we are also commanded not to be unaware of his presence or ignorant of his schemes (2 Corinthians 2:11, Ephesians 6:11-12). And we are further commanded to stay sober-minded and be on the alert because he is always seeking to devour us (1 Peter 5:8).

Realize that God did not intend for you to make your spiritual journey alone. You need community. You need help from teachers, mentors, and spiritual mothers and fathers who have successfully made the journey ahead of you and can show you the way.

How Can We Know We Are Saved

There is a tension in scripture between trusting in God's keeping power and recognizing our vulnerability to be deceived and fall away. On one hand, John said he had written to those who believed in the name of the Son of God, **"so that you may know that you have eternal life"** (1 John 5:13). But on the other hand, Paul told the Corinthians to **"test yourselves to see if you are in the faith"** (2 Corinthians 13:5). He also told the Philippians to **"work out your salvation with fear and trembling"** (Philippians 2:12). And Peter told a group of believers to **"be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you"** (2 Peter 1:10).

Parents and pastors need to empower their people, as they mature, not to look primarily to them or to a formula for reassurance of their salvation, but to go to the Word and to the Lord Himself. Romans 8:16 says, **“The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God.”** In the end, it doesn’t matter whether our parents, pastor, or other believers tell us we are saved. Only God’s testimony matters.

If parents and pastors do this in the right way, exercising love and wisdom, the result may be that people will stop living in immaturity or false security. They may start seeking the Lord and His word for themselves to know whether they are saved. They may develop a richer relational history with Him that will become the basis for their confidence rather than human agreement or an over-simplified formula.

Next

No one understands what the parent of a prodigal child experiences better than God. Scripture has some powerful words of wisdom and comfort for such parents. We will examine some of them in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 11 – GOD’S PROTECTION

If nothing in the universe is more important to God than the safety of His children, what does His word say to us when our children are in spiritual jeopardy?

No passage in scripture speaks to this more powerfully than Matthew 18, which is, largely, about new converts who have fallen away. Jesus used a physical child as an illustration, but we know He was talking about *spiritual* children because He said they have been converted (vs. 3), they believe in Him (vs. 6), and they have angels assigned to them (vs. 10). Jesus’ words could be broken down into 4 parts:

- 1) A Warning
- 2) An Illustration of God’s Concern and Empathy
- 3) A Strategy
- 4) An Encouragement

A Warning

First, at the beginning of the chapter, we see that some of the strongest words Jesus ever spoke are against those who become stumbling blocks to new converts:

“...whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea...” (vs. 6)

An Illustration of God’s Concern and Empathy

Next, in verses 12-14, we see God’s intense urgency to recover young converts who go astray. He illustrates this with a parable in which a man has a hundred sheep, one goes astray, and he leaves the other ninety-nine on the mountains to go in search of it. When he finds it, he rejoices more over it than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. This parable is easily understood by parents. How much more would any parent rejoice over finding a missing child than rejoicing that his or her other children that never wandered off to begin with?

A sheep symbolizes a convert in this passage. Jesus tells an almost identical parable in Luke 15, along with the parable of the Lost Coin and the parable of the Prodigal Son. All of these are devoted to explaining God’s intense concern over His children when they go astray.

A Strategy

Next, after sharing His deep emotion, Jesus gives a clear, specific strategy for how to recover a lost spiritual child in verses 15-17. This involves lovingly confronting the sin or deception, first individually, then with one or two other trustworthy believers, then as a church community. If he still doesn’t repent, scripture says to treat him as a gentile or tax collector, which means to accept his decision not to repent and begin praying for him.

An Encouragement

Whenever we grasp the danger a child is in who is falling away, it is easy to become fearful, which is counterproductive. Therefore, Jesus concludes the passage with possibly the most powerful words about prayer outside of the Lord's Prayer that have ever been uttered:

"Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst." (vs. 18-20)

There's nothing we can pray for that is nearer to God's heart than the safe recovery of His straying children. However, He wants us to pray from a place of confidence in His power, not from a place of fear. So He tells us exactly how much authority we have in His name when we intercede for them. We have authority to bind the works of Satan that have deceived them and to loose God's grace, mercy, and active intervention into their lives. Finally, if we join forces with at least one or two other believers, the power of our prayers increases exponentially.

In 1 Corinthians 13, the Bible's most famous passage on love, the very first adjective Paul used to explain what love is like is **"patient"**. Perhaps this is because when someone we love is in danger, we feel tempted to panic. If we are not careful, we can resort to pressuring or controlling, which only drives them away faster. However, when we remember God's patience, we realize He is not panicking. He is not overwhelmed by their deception or intimidated by their bondage. He knows they are not beyond His power to rescue. He is filled with hope, not despair. He has not given up; He is in pursuit.

I Was a Prodigal

A number of people in my life know what it is like to have their hearts broken by a prodigal... because *I* was a prodigal. My mistreatment of Jenny and my spiritual deception were so great that our parents and pastors all began counseling her to move on. My own mother said she "gave up all hope" that I would safely return. My father said he never prayed more fervently in his life. Jenny's parents and our pastor said similar things. Now each of them describes our restoration as miraculous... and I don't think they even know half of everything that happened. My marriage should have died years ago, and any remnant of biblical faith right along with it. There is no good explanation for why they are intact today except for the faithfulness of God and the prayers of parents, pastors, and a wife who did not stop interceding even after all hope was lost.

Next

The love a parent feels for his or her child is unlike anything else in life. But how do we guard against idolizing our children? How do guard against parenting them more for our own sakes than for their sakes? We will explore this topic in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 12 – IDOLATRY OF CHILDREN

Matthew 10:37 says, “**He who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.**” One of the most common and most socially acceptable forms of idolatry in the church is idolatry of children. This is sometimes more of a struggle for women. Men make idols out of children too, but more frequently idolize pursuits outside the home, such as a career or hobby.

Parents can easily drift into getting their greatest sense of purpose, identity, and fulfillment from parenting rather than relating to God. This does children a serious disservice. It gradually results in parents loving their children more for their own sakes than for the child's sake. It is no longer sacrificial. The parent unconsciously develops the expectation that their children owe them happiness. This leads to various unhealthy consequences such as enmeshment (the child not developing his/her own, separate identity) or resentment and rebellion.

Unhealthy Attachments

I recently heard a message about parenthood by a well-known Christian leader and author. Trying to be delicate yet straightforward, he stated that the way many Christian mothers love their children is parasitic. It stems from the husband not meeting his wife's need for emotional connection, so she turns to her children as her source of life. The man's idolatry of a career induces the woman's idolatry of her children. Neither of them finds his/her life in God.

He went on to say that this can contribute to why mothers-in-law sometimes treat their daughters-in-law abrasively. The mother feels almost as though her son is committing adultery with another woman because he was her primary source of male companionship. Jesus understood how common this family dynamic is. Perhaps this is why He specifically identified the mother-in-law, daughter-in-law relationship as being likely to cause division both in Matthew 10:35 and Luke 12:53.

Putting Your Child on the Altar

In Genesis 22, God commanded Abraham to lay his son Isaac upon an altar and sacrifice him. Abraham immediately obeyed. Abraham's obedience showed that he did not idolize his son. He loved Isaac, but he did not *need* him. This is a sign of a truly great parent.

God does not need us. He does not need us to feel joyful, fulfilled, or complete. Therefore, He is free to love us for our own sakes, not for His sake. There is nothing self-serving about how He deals with us. Every choice He makes is based on what is best for us, not what will make Him feel good.

One reason it is easy to find our purpose in parenting is because someone we love needs us and it feels good to be needed. However, the ultimate goal of a parent, in a sense, is actually to make himself *not* needed. If a parent is successful, he will have passed on his love and wisdom to such an extent that his children have been fully formed by it and are ready to move out into the world without him.

The way God parents often feels counterintuitive to human parents. For example, a mother (or father) who did not learn to put her son on the altar will never let him hit rock bottom if he chooses a foolish path. She will keep rescuing him and enabling him to continue in foolishness. She will never let him fully experience the consequences of his choices because it hurts her too much to watch him suffer. Her rescuing is really about her own discomfort rather than what is best for the son.

God does not try to control outcomes. He focuses on doing His part well as the parent, but knows He cannot control the ultimate results of His parenting. We have a free will. As He did in the Garden of Eden, God can do everything right and still get negative results that lead to pain and grief. No one has ever experienced this reality more deeply than God.

Idolatry and Image-Passing

God's design is for parents to pass some of their image on to their children, while still giving them the freedom to discover their own unique identity, gifts, and calling. However, one way that idolatry of children manifests in some families is by parents trying to conform their children *fully* into their own image or into a mold they can live through vicariously. This has the potential to kill the destiny God created them for.

Successful parents help their children develop their own relationship with God so they gradually come to be fathered more by Him than by them. They also prepare themselves for the possibility that their children's futures may look different than they thought. It could be something they never thought of. Or even be something they are initially uncomfortable with, which was true of many people God used in scripture.

Successful parents also seek out others who exemplify some aspects of Christ's character better than they do and point their children toward them. They know that, while they may have some strengths their children can emulate, they also need to look to others to model areas they are weak in.

One pastor did the following. He anticipated that his son might become less receptive to his dad's counsel when he became a teenager. So he carefully identified several godly men that he and his son both liked. Each man had a different character strength. For example, one man had courage and boldness. Another man was faithful and diligent whenever he was given a task to complete. Another man exuded unconditional love. With the group's permission, the pastor explained to his son the different qualities that each man embodied, encouraged him to glean from them, and told him that if he ever needed godly, masculine counsel from someone other than dad, these men were more than willing.

What if more parents did this? What if more Christian leaders and pastors (spiritual parents) did this as well, pointing their people to other leaders and churches, who have strengths they don't? How much better off would the body of Christ be?

Next

When you think of the book of Exodus, is parenthood a topic that comes to mind? If not, you might be surprised at how much this topic is addressed. We'll explore some passages in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 13 – PARENTHOOD IN EXODUS

In Exodus 13, the very first thing God commanded the Israelites to do after leaving Egypt was to consecrate every firstborn son, saying: **“Sanctify to Me every firstborn, the first offspring of every womb among the sons of Israel... it belongs to Me.”** (Exodus 13:2)

Why was consecrating the firstborn God’s most immediate priority? This passage emphasizes perhaps the single most important truth of Christian parenting: Our children do not belong to us. They belong to God and we are only temporary stewards.

It can be tempting to hold a child back from God if letting go feels risky in some way. When God gave this command, the Israelite firstborn males were soon going to face the prospect of war with giants and seasoned warriors who occupied the Promise Land. They needed to be fully resolved to obey God to the point of literally laying down their lives. This was the only way they would fulfill God’s purpose for their generation. This would be a difficult or impossible task to complete if their families tried to deter them out of fear for their safety.

Unfortunately, this is exactly what happened. Even though the Israelites symbolically consecrated their children to the Lord that day, they apparently took them back in their hearts. Not five years later when they stood at the edge of the Promise Land, the Israeli parents rebelled against God for fear that their children would become prey to their enemies (Numbers 14:31). In so doing, they disqualified themselves from their inheritance and delayed their children’s inheritances for 40 years.

Is God’s command to consecrate our children any less critical today than it was for Israel? Absolutely not. The spiritual war our children live in the midst of is no less real or dangerous than the physical war the Israelites were facing. In today’s war, the very safest thing a son or daughter can do (speaking of eternal safety, rather than temporal safety) is to follow God’s lead into battle rather than holding back for fear of the cost.

There are no guarantees of physical safety, comfort, wealth, or respectability in this life. In fact, we are told to expect the opposite – suffering and tribulation (ex. Acts 14:22, Romans 8:17). However, one thing we *are* promised if we walk with God is *His presence in our lives*. His presence is worth far more than safety, wealth, or respectability, but only if we learn to see from an eternal perspective. Teaching our children to view life in this way is a far greater inheritance than anything else we could give them.

America could soon be at a crossroads similar to the one Israel faced. Our nation won’t survive much longer without turning back to God. We are coming under noticeably heavier bondage every few years. We are overdue for revival. But if a revival comes, what will prevent us from going right back into bondage after it subsides? Only one thing: Consecrating our children to the Lord. Without this, even the greatest revival in history can only last a single generation... and then die.

Further Instructions to the Israelites Upon Leaving Egypt

After God commanded the Israelites to consecrate every firstborn, He further instructed the fathers to tell their sons:

“It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt... With a powerful hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery.” (vs. 8, 14)

Notice how God personalizes it, saying, **“...what the Lord did for *me*...”** There is only one way a parent can even have the *ability* to consecrate his child: He must consecrate himself first.

One of the reasons many young Christians fall away upon entering adulthood is because their parents, in a sense, went back to Egypt instead of entering the Promise Land.

The Promise Land represents continuing to surrender our lives to God and walking closely with Him after being saved. Egypt represents going back to seeking affirmation and fulfillment from the world, which is idolatry. Our culture in America has become so saturated with idolatry that many Christians have been seduced by it. We prefer the slavery of Egypt over waiting with God in the wilderness or fighting for our Promise Land. We’ve lost our vision.

The Mark of God

The Lord also commanded the fathers to put a sign **“on your hand”** and **“on your forehead”** in front of their children as a reminder of how He delivered them from slavery (vs. 9, 16). This mark, which is analogous to the marks seen in Ezekiel 9:4 and Revelation 7:3, is “God’s mark”, which Satan will counterfeit with the mark of the beast in the last days.

In Revelation 13:16, the mark of the beast symbolizes allegiance to Satan. It authorizes a person to participate (economically and otherwise) in his kingdom. God’s mark works similarly. When we take God’s mark, it means we trust more in Him than in the systems of the world. We trust Him to provide for us, protect us, guide us, and impart value and identity to our lives.

This is another important facet of the Christian life parents can model to their children. Every system in this world that is not aligned with God’s kingdom (including systems of government, economics, religion, family, business, science, entertainment, etc....) is guaranteed to be shaken and destroyed eventually (Hebrews 12:26-28). It is only a matter of when. If this happens in our lifetimes, even in part, how traumatic it is for each of us will depend on the extent to which we have put our trust in God’s kingdom rather than in the world’s systems. This does not mean we never participate in the world’s systems, but it means we don’t depend on them for our sense of security because we have entrusted ourselves to God.

Curses and Blessings

Let's look at just one more parenting lesson from one of the most well-known passages in the book of Exodus – when the Lord passed by in front of Moses on Mount Sinai and declared His nature.

Before looking at what He declared, it is important to understand that God holds each person responsible for his own choices. A child is not responsible for his parents' choices. For example, Ezekiel 18:20 says:

“The son will not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son’s iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.”

However, the Bible also consistently teaches that children are deeply *affected* by their parents' choices. Fathers or mothers can actually bring a curse upon their children that remains for generations unless it is broken by the power of the cross. This reality is so basic to God's design for family that it is a key aspect of how He declared himself when He passed before Moses. He said in Exodus 34:6-8:

“The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, *visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.*”

In effect, God was saying this: *“Because of how I created the family to work, with children so utterly dependent and so easily shaped by their parents, a parent’s sin will profoundly affect a child’s spiritual development and potentially echo through multiple generations.”*

The opposite is also true. When parents pursue righteousness, God visits a *blessing* on the children and grandchildren and beyond. Whether positive or negative, the choices we make in our homes today continue to impact our descendants decades or even centuries into the future.

Another example of this principle can be found in Jesus' parable in Matthew 18:23-35. When a slave (which represents a believer) has an enormous debt (of sin) he cannot repay, the king (God) commands that he be sold *along with his wife and family*, illustrating how a father's sin can bring his whole family under bondage.

Because of this principle, one of the most powerful ways to break free from demonic oppression passed down from previous generations is to confess sinful patterns passed down to us by our parents. This does not mean taking responsibility for their choices, but it does mean acknowledging that we have a free will and at some point we became willing participants in

following after their example. Examples of this can be found in Ezra 9:7, Nehemiah 9:2, and Daniel 9:5-16.

2 Corinthians 6:17-18 says that when we part ways with sinful patterns from our past, including those we received from our families, God says: **“...I will welcome you. And I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me.”** No matter what we received from our human parents, the most loving Father in the universe is ready to welcome us into His family. He can re-parent us, heal us, and redeem broken areas of our lives that the enemy once cursed.

Next

Spiritual fathers and mothers are a gift from God. However, it is important for children to guard their hearts against turning their parents into idols. I learned this the hard way. I'll share more in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 14 – IDOLATRY OF PARENTS

Young boys and young men crave a father figure. Young girls and young women crave a mother figure. We look for heroes to emulate. We look for someone who is excelling in an area we are passionate about so we can imitate them.

If a young man's passion is to follow Christ, he looks for an older man who has been successful at this. If his biological father did not model it, he might look to a pastor. This is not wrong. God created us to need role models.

The apostle Paul taught this concept repeatedly. He told the Philippians, **“The things you have... seen in me, practice these things”** (Philippians 4:9). He told the Thessalonians that he offered himself **“as a model”** for them so that they would follow his example (2 Thessalonians 3:9). He told the Corinthians, **“Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ”** (1 Corinthians 11:1).

One of the main ways we behold Christ is by beholding His attributes in spiritual fathers and mothers. This is vital because the way we are transformed into His image is by beholding Him. This is why 2 Corinthians 3:18 says it is by beholding Him that we are **“transformed into the same image”** or why Hebrews 2:12 says to fix **“our eyes on Jesus”**.

However, it is also common to turn spiritual fathers and mothers into idols. We begin looking more to them as our model than to Christ. When we do this, we not only take on their good qualities, but unconsciously take on their bad ones as well. A key lesson on the road to spiritual maturity is learning how to behold and emulate Christ-like qualities in others without turning them into an idol.

The same is true of our approach to scripture. We emulate certain attributes of men and women in scripture because they are part of Christ's nature. Abraham kept strong faith while he waited for God's promise because it is the nature of Jesus to have strong faith. Jacob longed for a great spiritual inheritance because it is the nature of Jesus to long for a great spiritual inheritance. David's passionate heart of worship; Daniel's courage in the face of death; Jeremiah's grief and brokenness over Israel's sin; Solomon's wisdom to rule; Job's commitment not to blame God for his suffering – all these qualities point to the nature of Jesus. Their successes were only possible through His empowerment. By contrast, their failures are also recorded to help us avoid turning them into idols, but to see them as human and avoid repeating their mistakes.

Because different men and women embody different aspects of Christ's nature, it is good to have multiple models to emulate over the course of our lives. This helps remind us that it is ultimately Christ we are seeking to behold, not any other man or woman.

As spiritual sons and daughters, we must guard our hearts against idolizing our role models. We must guard against wanting their approval more than the approval of God. We must guard

against thinking they are always right and could never mislead us. We must guard against putting them ahead of our spouse. (The command to leave our father and mother and cleave to our spouse can apply to *spiritual* parents, as well as biological parents.) We must remember our ultimate goal is not to become like them, but to become like the Lord. If we are looking more to Christ than to our role models, we will be able to receive the good without also taking on the bad.

My Serious Mistakes

I made serious mistakes in this area early in my marriage. For several years I beheld a man that I thought of as a spiritual father figure whom I now believe is a deceiver. Among other problems, he modeled a false message that a man's outside-the-home calling is more important than his inside-the-home calling. This is like putting the building before the foundation it is built upon. If I had not made this man into an idol, perhaps I would have been able to receive some good things without taking on the bad. Instead, I did turn him into an idol and it nearly destroyed my marriage.

While my marriage was being restored, I felt like the Lord impress upon me that I need to be re-fathered, spiritually. As I prayed about who my new spiritual father figure should be, I felt led to an evangelical leader whose ministry was devoted to building godly marriages and families. I began reading and listening to all the material he published. The more I spent time receiving from him, the more I became inspired by God's perspective of the high calling of a husband and a father.

Next

Many young people sincerely desire to live sold-out lives for the Lord, but do not know how because they did not receive adequate modeling. This was also the case of the generation that entered the Promise Land in the book of Joshua. In the next chapter, we'll find out how God prepared them for their destinies.

CHAPTER 15 – WHAT IF I HAD NO MODEL?

How do young believers live sold-out lives for the Lord if they did not receive modeling from their parents? One answer could be found in Joshua 5 and 6. In these chapters, the Lord prescribed a series of steps for a new generation to follow upon entering the Promise Land. This generation did not receive good modeling from their parents. Let's take a look at the steps God provided, and then explore the parallels they contain for modern-day believers.

The Promise Land

The generation that died in the wilderness did not trust God to give them the Promise Land. They shrank away in fear from the enemies that occupied it (Numbers 14). Therefore, God had to ask their sons to do the exact opposite of what was modeled to them.

On top of this, the generation that died in the wilderness failed to circumcise their sons. Therefore, Joshua had to circumcise them when they were full-grown men, in plain view of their enemies, before they could take their inheritance (Joshua 5). Once they did this, God declared that He had given Jericho – the first deposit of their promised inheritance – into their hands.

However, God's word did not come to pass immediately. In fact, when God said this, Jericho was still an impenetrable fortress with no apparent way to conquer it. Therefore, the Israelites had to exercise faith and patience. They had to believe God's word was true even though their circumstances had not changed.

Next, they obeyed God by marching in circles around their inheritance without ever actually approaching it. On the surface, this seemed illogical and counterproductive. However, their willingness to obey God by faith, without understanding His reasons, invited His supernatural intervention into their circumstances. On the seventh day, the great walls of Jericho suddenly came crashing down. Israel's enemies were left defenseless and the first installment of their inheritance was handed to them on a silver platter (Joshua 6).

A Pattern for First-Time Promise-Takers

The aforementioned sequence of events contains a parallel for how God sometimes deals with young people who were not spiritually circumcised. When Christian parents become spiritual wanderers, never laying ahold of the promises or inheritance God intended for them, they typically also do not spiritually circumcise their children. Their children may have correct doctrines, but they never fully surrender their lives to the Lord because it was not modeled to them.

Nevertheless, God can provide grace for children to overcome this lack of modeling. When they reach the age of independence, God apprehends them with a vision of the inheritance He has in mind for them – their promise land, so to speak. In other words, He puts His dreams in their hearts.

However, God's dreams do not come cheaply or easily. The first step to laying ahold of them is circumcision – cutting away the old self-serving form of Christianity we were used to and re-consecrating ourselves to be used by the Lord however He wishes. This can be facilitated through the discipleship / mentoring of one or more spiritual father or mother figures, just as the Israelites were circumcised by Joshua.

The next steps are faith and patience. We must believe God can really cause the dreams He put in our hearts to be fulfilled. Not only that – we must *persevere* in believing for a period of time, possibly many years or decades. During this time He may have us doing mundane, seemingly unproductive things that have nothing to do with taking ahold of our inheritance – marching in circles, as it were. This is why Hebrews 6:12 exhorts us to be **“imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”**

The purpose of these steps is to shape our characters so we will be trustworthy stewards of our inheritances. If there is something we want than closeness with God, we are not mature enough to have it without turning it into an idol. Persevering through these steps helps us esteem the presence of God in our lives even more than the good things He wants to give us.

When we persevere through an ordained season of waiting, God can easily make up for all the “unproductive” time we spent performing tasks unrelated to our inheritance. He can supernaturally cause barriers to our calling to come crashing down and empower us to overcome any opposition from the enemy.

What is My Mission?

When young believers approach adulthood, some of the most burning questions on their hearts are: *What is my purpose? What did God create me for? How will He use me to impact the world for His kingdom?*

Some young people feel caught between wanting to fully devote themselves to serving God and wanting to pursue a field of study or a career path they feel passionate about. This is often a false dilemma. Virtually every field of human endeavor can be a powerful tool for the advancement of God's kingdom. I'm not referring to the need for Christians to be salt and light in every area of society, although that is true too. I am saying *the fields themselves* can be a witness because they reveal God's nature.

Consider the following incomplete list of fields of human pursuit:

- Government
- Economics
- Business
- Physics
- Chemistry

- Biology
- Law Enforcement
- Health/Medicine
- Food/Agriculture
- News Media/journalism
- Entertainment/Music/Athletics
- Family/Marriage/Sexuality
- Church/Religion
- Technology/Engineering
- Construction/Manufacturing
- History/Anthropology
- Sociology/Psychology

All of these fields can be used to reveal facets of God's nature. None of them is incompatible with "ministry" or "missionary work". They are all potential ministries and mission fields. Young people can much more easily be excited about ministry, missionary work, and advancing God's kingdom when they realize these things are directly aligned with their personal dreams and passions.

We experience and radiate God's presence in a special way when we do what we were created to do. We feel excited and fulfilled and thankful. This kind of holy fulfillment manifests God's presence and is a powerful witness to those around us even if they can't readily identify what they are sensing. This is true whether it is on a construction site or in a chemistry lab or in a classroom.

The very first mention in scripture of someone being filled with God's Spirit is Exodus 31:2-5. The man's name was Bezalel. For what purpose was he filled with God's Spirit? Was it to preach the gospel or prophesy or heal someone? No, actually it was to create beautiful artistic designs in metal, stone, and wood. The passage states:

"I have called by name Bezalel, the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. I have filled him with the Spirit of God in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all kinds of craftsmanship, to make artistic designs for work in gold, in silver, and in bronze, and in the cutting of stones for settings, and in the carving of wood, that he may work in all kinds of craftsmanship."

This man, Bezalel, was a craftsman whom God anointed to be excellent at his trade and glorify God through it. The same is true of men and women God would send into *every* field or industry.

A while back I spent a few years learning everything I could about economics. I could not believe the treasures of wisdom contained in this field. I had never seen so clearly as through

the field of economics how God created mankind for individual freedom, creative labor, prosperity, and generosity. Everything about it screamed to me, *"God is Glorious!"* At the same time, Satan's kingdom has an approach to economics that has an appearance of righteousness, but leads individuals and nations into deep bondage. I think virtually every field of study and human endeavor is like that – having the potential to reveal the glory of God, but susceptible to clever satanic counterfeiting.

We live in a fallen world. 1 John 5:19 says, **"...the whole world lies in the power of the evil one."** In this age, Christians will always be lights in the darkness. We will never "conquer" or "rule over" the kingdoms of earth until after Christ's return. Therefore, Satan's approach to a given field is typically far more prominent and accepted by the mainstream than God's approach. Even so, there are few things in life more exciting than discovering our unique talents and passions and then using them to reveal a facet of God's nature and kingdom to those in our spheres of influence.

Next

In the next chapter, we will look at the first of three scriptural examples of children building upon a foundation laid by their parents.

CHAPTER 16 – EXAMPLES OF SPIRITUAL PARENTS

The first scriptural example of children building upon the foundation laid by their parents is David and Solomon. We can clearly see three areas in which Solomon built upon the foundation his father David laid:

- 1) The Wisdom to Rule over a Domain
- 2) The Stability and Greatness of the Domain
- 3) The Presence of God in the Domain

The Wisdom to Rule

David ruled over Israel with unnatural wisdom. In Psalm 119:98-100 (usually attributed to David) he wrote:

“Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever mine. I have more insight than all my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, because I have observed Your precepts.”

Many of David’s insights into God’s ways are recorded in one of the most beautiful and profound documents ever written – the Psalms. David’s wisdom confounded those around him. He went into battle against Goliath, a man that terrified every other soldier because he understood God’s anointing upon him made Goliath’s size and strength a nonfactor. Also, he repeatedly spared Saul’s life and continued in submission to him rather than taking hold of the throne God promised to give him. This is because he understood God’s principles for authority, submission, and waiting for His timing.

Nevertheless, David’s wisdom merely laid the foundation for Solomon’s wisdom. Solomon became the wisest man who ever lived besides Jesus. He authored the “Wisdom Books” of scripture – Proverbs and Ecclesiastes – and 1 Kings 4:29 says his wisdom and discernment was like the sand of the seashore. He said in Ecclesiastes 1:16, **“I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me.”**

All the kings of the earth sought him to hear the wisdom God put in his heart. When a foreign queen traveled from the ends of the known earth to hear his wisdom, she was skeptical about whether it could live up to the hype. However, when she questioned him at length about all that was in her heart, nothing was hidden from Solomon that he did not explain to her. When she further saw the way he ordered his kingdom, even to the details of the food, attire, and architecture, she was breathless. She finally declared that, despite all the wild claims she had heard, they did not adequately capture even half of Solomon’s wisdom. (2 Chronicles 9)

The Stability and Greatness of the Realm He Ruled Over

David built up Jerusalem and the surrounding area into a great stronghold. Under his authority, Israel became greater and greater. His army was led by renowned, mighty warriors. He

defeated a series of enemy kingdoms, expanded his rule, and greatly increased in wealth (1 Chronicles 11, 18-20).

However, his rule was also checkered with failure and calamity. Israel was at war during David's entire reign. The sword never departed from his household (2 Samuel 12:10). Israel experienced three years of famine (2 Samuel 21), two rebellions (2 Samuel 15, 20), and severe pestilence (2 Samuel 24). Many of these things were even the direct consequence of David's sins.

By contrast, there may never have been a more peaceful, prosperous, and glorious season for any nation in world history than there was for Israel in the early years of Solomon's rule. God gave him peace on all sides. Every man lived in safety and prosperity. There was such an abundance of gold and other forms of wealth that silver was not even considered valuable. The fame of the Lord was exalted through Solomon and Israel throughout the known earth. (1 Kings 4, 2 Chronicles 9) It was the closest thing the world has yet seen to the Millennial Kingdom.

The Presence of God in the Realm He Ruled Over

The presence of God during the rule of David was remarkable. David brought the ark of God's presence into Jerusalem and assigned ministers to worship and offer sacrifices before Him continually, day and night. He also had it in his heart to build a magnificent temple as a permanent dwelling place for God's presence. Therefore, God put His hand upon David so that he could understand and write in exhaustive detail everything such a temple would require. He accumulated great wealth and materials for the temple construction and established patterns for ministry and worship with various divisions of priests, musicians, gatekeepers, treasure keepers, and other servants. (1 Chronicles 23-28)

However, because he had shed so much blood on the earth, God did not allow David to build the temple (1 Chronicles 22:8). David passed on all his plans and preparations to Solomon, which Solomon executed faithfully. When construction was complete, the glory of God filled the temple in the form of a cloud. His glory was so overwhelming that the priests could not enter the temple or even remain standing. Then fire came down from heaven and the entire nation fell to the ground face-first and worshipped God, saying, **"Truly He is good, truly His lovingkindness is everlasting."** (2 Chronicles 5, 7)

Conclusion

Just like David and Solomon, modern believers are also called to rule over a domain, in a sense. For example, a believer's domain could be his home, church, or workplace. This calling may include seeking God for wisdom in how to rule over it, expanding it through faithful stewardship, and acting as a carrier of God's presence into it.

Unfortunately, Solomon's life reminds us that the negative side of a spiritual inheritance can also be built upon and can ultimately destroy us. In disobedience to the Lord's specific command for kings in Deuteronomy 17:17, David multiplied wives and personal wealth

throughout his reign. Then Solomon took each of these failures to the next level and tragically fell away from the Lord. He did not refuse anything his eyes desired (Ecclesiastes 2:10). He took hundreds of wives and concubines and eventually began worshipping their demon gods. Also, he accumulated so much wealth that the repeated use of the number “666” (1 Kings 10:14, 2 Chronicles 9:13) in connection to it suggests he began to worship money more than in the Lord, just as this number represents allegiance to a satanic economic system in Revelation 13:18.

Next

The second example of children building upon the foundation laid by their parents is Elizabeth and Mary. These two women faced circumstances very few of us can even imagine, but they overcame them together.

CHAPTER 17 – ELIZABETH AND MARY

Elizabeth was a godly woman. Descended from Aaron, married to Zacharias the priest, the Bible says she **“walked blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord”** (Luke 1:6). This does not refer primarily to rituals or ceremonies since the Old Testament is filled with commands *for the heart* such as do not covet (Exodus 20:17), love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18), and love God with all your heart (Deuteronomy 6:5). Elizabeth had a blameless *heart* in the sight of God.

Elizabeth overcame so much. She was barren her whole life in a society where a woman’s entire worth was based on childrearing. To be barren, in the eyes of many, was a curse from God. Imagine the pain she must have endured year after year while she waited, hoped, and prayed for God to give her a child. She must have wept herself to sleep countless nights after noticing other women whispering behind her back in the marketplace, either pitying her or judging her.

Perhaps Elizabeth sensed the call to be a mother from an early age. It must have been tormenting and confusing as she approached her 40’s and then her 50’s and the calling didn’t diminish. Maybe she thought she was going crazy. Maybe she wavered from one day to the next about whether she should keep believing God for a child or accept that it wasn’t His plan. Maybe she begged Him with all her heart to take away her desire to be a mother.

Now she was advanced in years, well beyond the ability to become pregnant. All hope was lost. Many women in her situation would have been overcome by bitterness long ago. They would have either blamed God, envied others, or despised themselves. But not Elizabeth. She determined to serve the Lord with all of her heart despite her shattered dreams and constant grief. She turned her pain into worship.

She must have thought to herself a thousand times that she wouldn’t know why God allowed this until she got to heaven. Little did she realize that all of heaven had been watching her the entire time. All of this had merely been preparation for stewarding the life of a man whose arrival all of Israel had been awaiting for hundreds of years, whose ministry was prophesied of by both Isaiah and Malachi (Isaiah 40:3, Malachi 4:5), and of whom Jesus said, **“...among those born of women there is no one greater”** (Luke 7:28).

The angel Gabriel appeared to Elizabeth’s husband Zacharias. He announced the coming of their son John and explained his destiny. When Elizabeth became pregnant, she kept it a secret and remained in seclusion for five months. Why? What was she doing those five months?

Luke 1:25 tells us exactly what she was doing. She was telling herself, **“This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men.”** In other words, Elizabeth spent those five months alone with the Lord, settling in her heart that this miraculous pregnancy was nothing less than the hand of God. She was preparing her heart for what lay ahead.

Elizabeth knew Gabriel's prophecy about her son would be hard for others to swallow. It must have sounded so grandiose and delusional to imagine telling friends and family who her son was. *"So you're saying your son is a forerunner for the Messiah? He's the one those scriptures in Isaiah and Malachi are talking about? And who did you say told Zacharias this – the angel Gabriel?"*

In all likelihood, many of them would sincerely fear for her sanity and think she needed help. Others would probably believe she was deceived by an evil spirit and perhaps even that this child was from the enemy. Other practical-minded people might suggest she prepare for a miscarriage or that the child could be born with health problems or deformities since both of its parents were so old.

If Elizabeth announced her pregnancy prematurely, she would have unnecessarily exposed herself and her unborn child to all kinds of skepticism, attacks, and negative talk. Satan was just as interested in this child as God was. He was ready at the drop of a hat to begin stirring up controversy in hopes of thwarting the child's destiny. Elizabeth wanted to be sure she was ready for this onslaught.

God had already protected her from doubt and skepticism once – He made Zacharias mute for doubting Gabriel's word. Now Elizabeth wisely did her part. She did everything she could to make sure both she and her miracle child were ready to face a doubting world with boldness and confidence.

Mary

Elizabeth was a seasoned veteran of trusting the Lord through difficult trials, but her young relative Mary had never been tested. Mary loved God with all her heart, but had no concept of the great cost of being used by Him. She had never experienced rejection or ridicule by those closest to her. She was a pure, innocent teenager engaged to be married to a godly man. She had her whole life ahead of her.

Mary had childlike faith that easily believed God for something miraculous. When the angel Gabriel explained that God would cause a child to supernaturally conceive in her womb, Mary replied, **"May it be done to me according to your word."**

In her youthful zeal and naiveté, perhaps she even imagined the people in her life would celebrate with her for having been chosen for this honor. She was likely completely unaware of the firestorm that could be unleashed when word went out that she was pregnant out of wedlock and claimed to be carrying God's Son. Would she be stoned for sexual immorality? Would she be committed to some kind of asylum for the mentally unstable? Would she be handed over to the religious leaders for deliverance and indoctrination? These were all real possibilities in her culture.

However, Gabriel also told Mary of Elizabeth's pregnancy and she immediately went to visit her. If Mary needed a confirmation that her pregnancy really was from the Lord, she got it the moment she entered the house. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, John leaped in her womb and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she cried out with a loud voice:

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord."

This moment was God's seal that Mary had come to the right place to be strengthened for what lay ahead.

Elizabeth spent an entire lifetime laying a foundation for her call to raise John. Now she would have three months pass this foundation onto young Mary so that she could build upon it. Mary desperately needed a spiritual mother to prepare her for what she was about to face and Elizabeth was perhaps the only woman on earth who was qualified.

Mary's challenges were similar to Elizabeth's, only greater. Elizabeth had to give birth when she was too old; Mary had to give birth while she was a virgin and unmarried. Elizabeth was tasked with raising a prophet; Mary was responsible for raising God's Son. Elizabeth faced possible skepticism and ridicule; Mary faced becoming an outcast or worse.

Through their long talks, Mary likely became aware of what was at stake. She had no guarantees of what to expect when she returned home. Would her fiancé bring her before the authorities? Would her parents disown her? If no one believed her, what would she do? How would she survive? A short time ago she was carefree and engaged to be married. Now her life, as she once knew it, was over. She began to see the great cost of being used by God in this way. She began to realize what it meant to lay down her life.

As they discussed her options, Mary knew she needed to do what Elizabeth had spent the last five months doing. She needed to settle in her heart that, despite whatever accusations may come, this was nothing less than the hand of God. She needed to stand boldly and confidently on His word even if every single human being in the world disbelieved her, save this one godly relative.

Because Mary had Elizabeth, she knew she was not alone. At least there was one person who could relate to her unimaginable circumstances and understand what she was going through. Thanks to Elizabeth, Mary knew that doing what God was asking of her was possible. If Elizabeth could do it, so could she. Elizabeth had gone on before her and paved the way.

After three months of prayer, mentoring, and faith-building, Mary returned home ready to face whatever may come. If Mary tried to tell her fiancé Joseph the truth, perhaps it went as well as could be expected. Joseph did not believe her story, but at least he still cared for her and wanted to shield her from public shame. He made plans to end their engagement quietly.

Mary must have felt heavy grief mixed with a deep, abiding peace. She didn't know what was next, but she knew she had obeyed the Lord and that He would not forsake her.

Then ...a miracle! An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and confirmed everything! In one night, everything changed. Now Mary was going to have a husband who believed her, who would protect and provide for her, and who would treat her Child like his own Son. Now she had a covering and a partner in the inconceivable task of raising the Son of God. God came through. He proved His faithfulness in the end... just like Elizabeth promised He would.

Next

The final biblical example of children building upon their parents' foundation is Elijah and Elisha. We would be hard-pressed to find a more powerful father-son combination in history.

CHAPTER 18 – ELIJAH AND ELISHA

Elijah was not a biological parent to Elisha, but he was his spiritual father. (Elisha calls Elijah his father twice in 2 Kings 2:12.) Just before Elijah was taken to heaven, Elisha asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit to be upon him. In essence, he was asking to walk in twice the anointing that Elijah walked in. Elijah could have taken offense at this, but instead, like a loving father, he helped Elisha obtain it.

Elisha's double anointing can be seen in a couple of ways. First, he did many of the same things Elijah did, but to a greater extent. Elijah prophesied a three and half year drought in Israel; Elisha prophesied a seven-year drought. Elijah primarily counseled or confronted one king; Elisha counseled or confronted multiple kings. Elijah was visited by an angel when he fled from his enemy Jezebel; Elisha was surrounded by an entire angelic army when he was hunted by the Arameans.

Second, Malachi 4:6 and Luke 1:17 say that the primary function of the spirit of Elijah is turning the hearts of the fathers to the children and the children to the fathers. In other words, it acts as a relational bridge between two generations. Elijah laid the foundation for this ministry by taking Elisha under his wing and mentoring him to become his replacement. Elisha then built upon this foundation by investing heavily into the next generation, just as Elijah invested in him.

Throughout Elisha's ministry, we see him spending time and ministering side by side with **“the sons of the prophets.”** (ex. 2 Kings 2:15, 4:1, 6:1, and 9:1) In fact, some of his finest miracles were performed in service to them. He supernaturally provided oil as a source of income to one of their widows. He miraculously cleansed their food when they all shared a meal (2 Kings 4). He helped one of them recover a borrowed ax head (2 Kings 6). Clearly, they were a tight-knit group that shared a great deal of affection for one another.

Spiritual fathering can work the same way today. Sometimes God provides spiritual fathers of different types of ministries or spiritual gifts. Then they equip their sons to function similarly, only with an even greater anointing, and to equip others after them.

What Did Elijah Do?

How did Elijah father Elisha? He modeled godly ministry to him. He did this by leading Elisha to a series of destinations where Elisha could learn by example. We are not told specifically what happened at these destinations, but I believe their names hold the answer. The destinations were Gilgal, Bethel, Jericho, and the Jordan River. Let's briefly look at each one.

Gilgal. Gilgal is best known as the place where God instructed all the Israelites to circumcise themselves in Joshua 5. Here, Elijah taught Elisha to cut away his old self-serving nature and consecrate himself fully to be used by the Lord.

Bethel. Bethel means house of God and is perhaps best known as a place of God's presence where Jacob saw angels ascending and descending to heaven in Genesis 28. Here, Elijah taught Elisha how to recognize, function in, and steward the presence of God so he could better know Him and make Him known to others.

Jericho. Jericho is typical of a stronghold of the enemy, known as the first stronghold Israel encountered in the Promise Land in Joshua 6. Here, Elijah taught Elisha how to stand in bold faith against a stronghold of the enemy and believe God for its complete destruction.

The Jordan River. The Jordan River, like baptism, represents death. The Jordan is where John the Baptist baptized and it is also where the younger generation of Israelites was baptized as a nation, similar to how the older generation had been baptized in the Red Sea. Here, Elijah taught Elisha to voluntarily submit to death and suffering for the sake of others' salvation.

Just as Elijah led Elisha, it is likewise the calling of some spiritual fathers and mothers to lead their sons and daughters through one or more of these milestones.

Next

The goal of any godly parent is the spiritual maturity of his children. But what exactly is spiritual maturity? How does the Bible define it? We'll find out in the next two chapters.

CHAPTER 19 – SPIRITUAL MATURITY PART 1

The primary goal of a parent (biological or spiritual) is the spiritual maturity of his or her children. But what exactly is spiritual maturity? How does the Bible define it?

There are a handful of passages that speak to this. I am going to draw primarily from three: Hebrews 6:1-2, Philippians 3:4-11, and Romans 12. These passages each identify various steps on the road to spiritual maturity. There is some overlap between them, so I've combined them into one expanded list.

1. Repentance from Dead Works (Hebrew 6:1, Philippians 3:4-9)
2. Faith in God (Hebrews 6:1, Philippians 3:9)
3. Knowing God (Philippians 3:10)
4. Sanctification / Mind Renewal (Hebrews 6:2, Romans 12:1-3)
5. Walking in Unique Gifts & Calling (Philippians 3:10, Romans 12:6-8, Hebrews 6:2)
6. The Fellowship of Christ's Sufferings (Philippians 3:10)
7. Being Conformed to Christ's Death (Philippians 3:10, Romans 12:14-21)

This list presupposes an initial surrender of overt, willful sin took place at conversion. Also, each of these steps is an area we (hopefully) continue to grow in our entire lives. I don't want to give the wrong impression that one step must be fully conquered before moving on to the next. Now, let's break down each step.

1. Repentance from Dead Works (Hebrew 6:1, Philippians 3:4-9)

The writer of Hebrews identified **"repentance from dead works"** as the **"foundation"** of Christianity. Every time we do something that appears "good" or "Christian" or "spiritual", but subconsciously seek to feed our sense of self-worth or compensate for underlying guilt, we perform a dead work.

This does not mean we should not exercise discipline. It does not mean we should stop praying, reading scripture, or assembling with other believers if we do these things out of guilt or self-righteousness. But it does mean being honest with God and others about the condition of our hearts and asking Him to change us.

We can also use parenthood or our careers as dead works – anything we rely on to help us feel acceptable. However, dead works are especially toxic when infused with religion and spirituality. Dead works are at the heart of every false religion. Even atheists want to feel like good people and often expend a tremendous amount of effort to convince themselves they are.

In Philippians 3:4-9, Paul listed several factors from which he might have derived self-worth – his nationality, his family of origin, his impeccable moral behavior, his career advancement, his

respectability in the eyes of his peers. Yet he gave up finding any value whatsoever in these things, saying:

“...those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ... I have suffered the loss of all things so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law [i.e. dead works]...”

Dead works are serious and dangerous. In a way, they are more deadly than overt sin because they are so deceptive. They have the appearance of righteousness. They cause some believers to think they are growing closer to God when they are actually pushing Him away. They cause other believers to think they can never be good enough for God and give up following Him under a cloud of condemnation.

Because repentance from dead works is so foundational, it is often the most heavily attacked area of a believer's life. Satan constantly pressures us to try to earn God's acceptance through moral performance, and then gets us to pressure others (including our children) in the same way. The way to combat this is found in the next step – Faith in God.

A Personal Story

Dead works are ingrained in our fallen nature even from childhood. When I was four years old, I stole several dollars' worth of quarters from my dad's home office. For the next two days, I felt physically sick with guilt. I was afraid to expose my sin to my father, so I secretly brought the money to church the next Sunday and put it in the offering, hoping to alleviate my guilt.

It seemed to work. I began to feel better. My relationship with my father had not been restored since I was still hiding something from him. But at least I could reason to myself that I was not a bad person since I ultimately gave the money away to a holy cause.

This is the quintessence of a dead work. It hides the truth of our condition. If I had the courage to tell my dad the truth, he would have reacted exactly as God does – he would have forgiven me and reaffirmed his love for me.

Incredibly, God kept my pursuing my little 4-year-old heart. The senior pastor of this *large* church happened to see me put the money in the offering and mailed a letter to my parents praising their son's virtuous character! When my parents read it and began telling me how proud they were of me, I knew I was a fraud. God gave me a wonderful opportunity to come into the light and confess my sin, but I still chose not to out of fear. Nevertheless, it is a wonderful illustration of the deceptive nature of dead works.

2. Faith in God (Hebrews 6:1, Philippians 3:9)

Hebrews 6:1 and Philippians 3:9 identify the second step of maturity as **“faith toward God”** or **“faith in Christ”**. Faith in God does not just mean believing He exists; it is agreement with the Bible about what He has done and what He is like.

This means believing our sins are really forgiven, He really loves us, and our relationship to Him is the foundation of our purpose and value. When we believe this from our hearts, not just as an intellectual concept, dead works are no longer necessary—there is no reason to work for something we already have.

Jesus said in John 15:9-10, **“Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love.”** Christ loves us exactly as the Father loves Him – infinitely. It never changes or wavers in the slightest. Our obedience or disobedience to His commands doesn’t affect it one iota. It only affects whether we **“abide”** in it, which means we allow our lives to be directed and shaped by it.

3. Knowing God (Philippians 3:10)

The apostle Paul in Philippians 3:10 sets apart **“...that I may know Him...”** as distinct from other steps. This refers to knowing God *relationally* and *experientially*. It means having a unique personal history together. Like any relationship, it means two-way interaction.

Relationship with God can be hard to define since He is invisible and inaudible, but it is probably more familiar to each of us than we might initially realize. For example, ask yourself the following questions:

- Have you ever experienced God giving you wisdom about a situation in your life?
- Has He changed your desires or priorities over time?
- Has He ever orchestrated circumstances in a way that His hand was evident?
- Have you ever gone to church and the message “coincidentally” addressed exactly what you were going through?
- Have you ever felt His presence in a palpable way?
- Has He ever opened your eyes to a sinful pattern you were previously oblivious to?
- Has He ever healed you from a past emotional wound?
- Has He ever comforted you during a time of grief?
- Has He ever empowered you to overcome a fear or anxiety or bitterness that previously seemed insurmountable?
- Has He ever guided you through an important decision, perhaps by imparting a sense of peace or clarity about what to choose?
- Has He ever touched you with overwhelming emotions during a time of worship?
- Has He opened your mind to understand a scripture you did not previously understand?
- Has He shown you how to pray for someone by guiding your thoughts during the prayer?
- Has He given you just the right thing to say to a hurting friend in need of encouragement?
- Have you ever had a dream you felt was from the Lord?

- Has He ever spoken something timely and personal to you through His word, during prayer, or through other believers?

Most believers have experienced several, if not all, of these. *Knowing God* is our source of life. It is what enables us to live out every other step. It is how biblical truth moves from our minds to our hearts.

No matter how much we agree intellectually with correct doctrines, we will only give up dead works to the extent we *experience* how much God loves and values us. We will only find freedom from guilt to the extent we *experience* His forgiveness. We will only be sanctified or fulfill our calling to the extent we *experience* His grace at work in our lives.

I'm not saying there isn't a place for exercising faith when our feelings or experiences don't seem to line up with biblical truth. But there is nevertheless a maturation that only takes place as a result of time and experience.

Christians are encouraged to read our Bibles, spend time in prayer, and assemble in community. However, we are not as frequently told *why* to do them. These are primary vehicles through which God's Spirit interacts with us. They are food and water. We cannot grow spiritually without these things any more than we can grow physically without eating or drinking.

4. Sanctification / Mind Renewal (Hebrews 6:2, Romans 12:2-3)

The next maturity step listed by the author of Hebrews is, **"instructions about washings"**, which refers to the process of *sanctification*. Sanctification means letting go of sinful habits and attitudes and replacing them with righteous ones. Similarly, Paul wrote in Romans 12:2, **"...do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind..."** Mind Renewal refers to letting go of false, worldly beliefs and replacing them with righteous ones.

Let's break up Sanctification / Mind Renewal into four categories:

- 1) Exercising Self-Control
- 2) Responding to Conviction
- 3) Viewing God Accurately
- 4) Viewing Ourselves Accurately

Exercising Self-Control

Part of sanctification is exercising self-control. This is why **"self-control"** is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23). Self-control means repeatedly rejecting sinful thoughts, words, and actions and instead choosing righteous ones until they become habitual. This pursuit is greatly affected by what media, relationships, and biblical teaching (or lack thereof) we let into our lives.

Proverbs 24:16 says **“a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again”**. People don’t form new habits instantly. It is simply impossible. It takes time and practice. There is no shame in stumbling if we get up and keep going. God is very patient and gentle with our sincere attempts to grow in righteousness.

Responding to Conviction

Conviction is a wonderful gift. It is the most loving thing God can possibly do when we are in sin and don’t realize it. Or maybe we do realize it, but don’t realize how serious it is.

Conviction is cause for rejoicing. It is like a wise doctor seeking you out on his own initiative and telling you you have a very early, very treatable form of cancer. Then he offers to remove it for you first thing tomorrow morning free of charge. Wouldn’t you be filled with gratitude toward such a doctor?

God never convicts us without providing grace to overcome our affliction. The very fact that He is convicting us means He is also offering us the power to change. This is why conviction is cause for celebration even though it may initially feel grievous.

There is an awesome picture of this in Nehemiah 8. When Ezra began reading God’s law to the people they were deeply convicted. They began to weep because they had disobeyed for so long. However, Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites said to them:

“This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep. ...Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. ...Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.”

After this word, they celebrated with a great festival. The people understood that God’s goal was not to weigh them down with sorrow, but to offer them a new beginning. Conviction stands in stark contrast to Satan’s counterfeit – condemnation – which points out a problem but offers no solution. Condemnation leaves us ashamed and discouraged, but conviction is accompanied by hope.

When we ignore God’s conviction (as we all have), it is like telling the wise doctor we don’t want to address the cancer he found just yet. Instead, we tell him the operation sounds inconvenient and uncomfortable. We’re not ready to give up the lifestyle that caused the cancer in the first place. We put it off. The longer we wait, the more serious it becomes. The operations required to remove it grow more numerous, painful, and expensive. Eventually, it becomes deadly. The cancer of unrepented sin can kill our relationships, our calling, and even our faith. Therefore, a major part of Christian maturity is learning to embrace and celebrate God’s conviction.

Viewing God Accurately

God is not a Restrictor, but a Fulfiller. He does not withhold good things from us; He protects us with wise boundaries. There is nothing in the universe God cannot give us or would not give us. Romans 8:32 says, **“He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?”** James 1:17 says, **“Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.”** The ironic truth is that the vast majority of sins Christians commit are in pursuit of things God *already plans to give us!*

Below is a list of several common sins followed by short descriptions of the godly desires they seek to fulfill:

- **Sexual Immorality** – Godly desire for sexual fulfillment
- **Witchcraft** – Godly desire to connect to the spiritual realm, since God is a spirit, as are we.
- **Greed / Jealousy** – Godly desire to steward wealth/possessions, provide for loved ones, exercise generosity; enjoyment of a home, food, travel, experiences, and everything money can buy.
- **Pride / Envy** – Godly desire to be affirmed and feel valuable or significant
- **Fear / Anxiety** – Godly desire to make wise plans and see them fulfilled
- **Substance Abuse** – Godly desire for encouragement, refreshment, and relief from pain or stress
- **Unforgiveness** – Godly desire for healing and a restored relationship
- **Idolatry** – Godly desire for *any* good thing that is not prioritized above our desire to know God and obey Him

Satan’s tactic since the beginning of creation was to offer a forbidden shortcut to something God already planned to give. In Genesis 3, he said to Eve, **“In the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”** God *wanted* Adam and Eve’s eyes to be opened eyes (ex. Ephesian 1:18). He *wanted* them to be like Him (ex. Ephesians 5:1). He *wanted* them to discern good and evil (ex. Hebrews 5:14). Each of these attributes would have increased in them the longer they walked with God.

Satan tried the same thing with Jesus. He offered Him authority over the earth if He would bow down and worship him (Matthew 4:9), even though God already planned to give Jesus this authority.

Sin is often pleasurable. The Bible doesn’t deny this. Hebrews 11:25 says Moses chose to abstain from **“the passing pleasures of sin”**. However, the path to freedom often feels like bondage at first, and the path to bondage often feels freedom at first. If we were allowed to indulge our most base desires (lust, greed, pride, etc...) as much as wanted for as long as we wanted, it might initially feel like freedom, but it would quickly grow into an addiction, resulting

in slavery. Not only would it no longer fulfill us, but we would need it in ever greater measures just to feel ok.

However, if we trust God's boundaries and pursue the good things we desire His way, our ability to enjoy them is richer and deeper. By learning how to make God our primary source of fulfillment, the joy we derive from all our secondary desires is magnified.

It is true that not all of our desires will be fully or even partly fulfilled in this life. This is where an eternal perspective is vital. 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 says:

“For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

This life is very short compared to the endless millennia we will exist beyond it. The depths of joy, peace, love, fulfillment, etc... we will experience in the future is far beyond anything we can imagine right now. Having an eternal perspective is crucial when we must lay down a deeply-felt desire, either temporarily or permanently, in order to follow Jesus.

Part of sanctification is learning *the Lordship of Christ*, which means to see Him as our King and Judge. It means we would do or surrender anything we knew with confidence He was asking of us, even if it involved pain or sacrifice, because He created us and paid for us. We belong to Him and we are accountable to Him.

View Ourselves Accurately

Paul wrote in Romans 12:3, **“...I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment...”** Another part of Sanctification / Mind Renewal is replacing trust in ourselves and our abilities with dependence on God. The truth is that we are all far more dependent on God's grace and protection than we realize. If God gave the enemy full access to us, allowing him to orchestrate any temptation he wanted for as long as he wanted, we would all fall headlong into bondage. The perfect combination of temptations, wounds, and weaknesses is all that stands between us and the sin we think we could never commit.

We also have no ability to accomplish anything of eternal significance apart from God's empowerment. This is why Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:5, **“Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God.”** God exalts the humble (James 4:10), displays His strength through our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9), and makes wise the simple (Psalm 19:7). However, he opposes the proud (James 4:6), debases human strength, and nullifies human wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:27-29). He even does this with His own children – not just the lost. If we feel self-confident and capable to accomplish

what God is calling us to, we are not ready. However, if we feel vulnerable and aware of our weaknesses and limitations, that is the safest place to be.

Next

In the next chapter, we'll examine the remaining steps on the road to spiritual maturity. What we uncover may lead you to conclude, as I did, that a spiritually mature Christian is perhaps the rarest kind of person in the world.

CHAPTER 20 – SPIRITUAL MATURITY PART 2

Let's pick up where we left off in the last chapter, moving on to maturity steps 5, 6, and 7.

5. Walking Out Our Unique Gifts & Calling (Philippians 3:10, Romans 12:6-8, Hebrews 6:2)

The next maturity step identified by all three passages is walking out our unique spiritual gifts and calling. In Romans 12:6-8, Paul exhorts every believer to **“exercise”** our spiritual gifts to build up the body of Christ. In Hebrews 6:2, the writer lists **“laying on of hands”**, which is frequently associated in scripture with being commissioned for ministry or bestowed with spiritual gifts (ex. 1 Tim 4:14, 5:22, 2 Tim 5:22). And Philippians 3:10 identifies **“the power of His resurrection”**, which is a reference to spiritual gifts since scripture repeatedly points to them as the evidence that Christ rose and ascended into heaven (Ephesians 4:8, 1 Corinthians 1:6-7, Luke 24:49).

How do gifts/calling relate to spiritual maturity? Let's divide the answer to this question into four parts:

- 1) Our Calling is Natural
- 2) Our Calling is an Inheritance
- 3) Our Calling is a Friendship
- 4) Our Calling Takes Time

Our Calling is Natural

Jesus said in John 15:5, **“I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit.”** When a branch becomes mature, it does not have to strive to bear fruit. Nor does it become anxious about whether it will produce enough. It simply abides in the vine and fruit comes naturally. In the same way, bearing eternal fruit is a natural consequence of becoming mature in Christ and living out the things He puts in our hearts to fulfill.

Our calling is often connected to our dreams and passions. God does not ask us to be someone we're not or exercise gifts we don't have. He does not squeeze us into someone else's mold. He helps us discover the unique purpose He created us for and live it out.

Psalm 37:4 says, **“Delight yourself in the Lord; and He will give you the desires of your heart.”**

Notice the verse does not say God gives us *what* we desire; it says the *desires themselves* come from Him. As we mature, God shapes our desires to align with the purposes He created us for.

The things we dream about when we mature are often very different than the things we dreamed about when we were younger. The world and the flesh have a way of drawing us after things God never intended for us. They evoke dreams of people being impressed with us, recognizing us, and affirming us. However, godly dreams seek to serve others in humility, not draw attention to ourselves. Colossians 3:3-4 says our true life and the glory God ascribes to us

is not actually recognizable in this age. It is hidden. It will only be fully revealed when Jesus is revealed at His second coming:

“For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.”

Our Calling is an Inheritance

Paul said in Galatians 4:1, “... as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything...” If we are heirs, what is our inheritance? We normally think of our inheritance as salvation, eternal life, or a place in heaven. That is part of it, but it is also more than that. We are heirs of *His Kingdom*. This means our inheritance includes the spheres of influence we are called to impact, both in this age and in the age to come. When we get saved, as Paul said in Galatians 4:1, we become “**owner of everything**”. However, we don’t actually begin to exercise this ownership until we mature.

*(I took Galatians 4:1 out of context. In context, it is speaking about a corporate maturity that was made available to the saints after Jesus’ first coming. However, I believe the individual application I extracted is valid and consistent with the rest of scripture. The kingdom of God has come to earth in this age only in part; in future ages it will come fully. Likewise, we can receive an initial deposit of our inheritance in this age, but won’t receive it fully until future ages. This is why Ephesians 1:14 says the Holy Spirit is given “**as a pledge of our inheritance**”. The Greek word for pledge means: a part of a payment, given in advance as a security that the whole will be paid afterwards. A role of the Holy Spirit is to empower us to be ambassadors of God’s kingdom. In other words, He empowers us to begin laying ahold of our inheritance.)*

Sometimes, maturing in Christ can involve a gradual expansion of influence. First, we are given authority over our own hearts. The Lord begins showing us what He wants to do in that sphere and invites us to labor with Him. If we are faithful, He could expand our influence, for example, to family members, friends, and coworkers. If we are faithful there, He could entrust us with still more.

A person’s calling is multi-faceted. We can be called to get married and raise a family. We can be called to exercise certain spiritual gifts or lead a particular ministry. We can be called to a certain field or industry in the marketplace. We can be called to minister to a specific age group, ethnic group, city, or nation.

There is nothing more threatening to the enemy’s kingdom than mature Christians. Mature Christians change the world around them. Their prayers and acts of obedience help destroy demonic strongholds that enslave family members, friends, and coworkers.

The journey into spiritual maturity is the most valuable pursuit a human being can pursue, but Satan has many Christians convinced the pursuit of hobbies, money, comfort, or human affirmation is somehow more worthwhile. The truth is many Christians do not reach the

maturity we are called to. Paul warned in 1 Corinthians 3:13-15 that some believers' lives will bear no fruit and they will be judged for this, even though they are still saved. Likewise, Jesus said many who receive the gospel remain unfruitful because **"the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desire for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful."** (Mark 4:19)

Our Calling is a Friendship

Would a father treat his ten-year-old son like a peer? Would he discuss in depth his marriage, his career goals, or his trials? Of course not; he would only share what is appropriate to the boy's age. The fact that the boy is only ten years old does not cause the father to love him less, but it does affect how he relates to him. It affects how deep and mature of a friendship bond they can share.

Jesus relates to us in the same way – in accordance with our maturity level. This is why it took three and half years of spending nearly every waking moment together before Jesus could say to the disciples:

"No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things I have heard from My Father I have made known to you." (John 15:15)

The essence of friendship with Jesus is Him sharing what He is doing, or wants to do, around us. He lays his burdens, dreams, and desires on our hearts. This is also a foundation of our calling. Calling and friendship go together.

I have heard pastors quote this verse and say that Jesus has called everyone who is saved His friend. If that is true, why did it take so long before He could call the disciples His friends? In this context, being Jesus' friend is more than just being saved. It is an indicator of spiritual maturity.

Notice how the previous two verses we looked at, Galatians 4:1 and John 15:15, both say being a **"slave"** comes before *inheritance* or *friendship*. A prerequisite to our calling is submitting our lives to the Lordship of Christ, which means we would do or surrender anything we knew with confidence He was asking of us, even if it involved pain or sacrifice. John 14:21 confirms this:

"He who has My commandments and keeps them [Lordship] is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him [deepening friendship and maturity]."

If we spend our whole lives as spiritual children we can miss out on friendship with Jesus, forfeit our inheritance in this age, and greatly diminish it in the age to come. We can also set ourselves up for a difficult judgment when we appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ, as Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 3:13-15 and 2 Corinthians 5:10.

Our Calling Takes Time

God is very patient and careful about opening doors to our calling. Why? Because if there is anything we want more than closeness with Him, we are not yet mature enough to have it without turning it into an idol. Many Christians have found out the hard way that if we don't learn to be content *before* stepping into our gifts/calling, we won't be content *afterward* without feeding our flesh. We will start deriving our self-worth from the good things we are accomplishing and the human affirmation we are receiving (dead works). We will drift into pride and self-sufficiency, which Satan is immediately ready to exploit.

When Moses was about 40 years old, he considered himself **“a man of power in words and deed”**. He mistakenly thought it would be obvious to his brethren that **“God was granting them deliverance through him”** (Acts 7:22-25). However, from God's perspective, Moses was a long way off from being ready for such a responsibility. At *eighty* years of age, God finally called Moses to do the thing he felt ready for at forty. Only this time Moses knew he was totally inadequate and had nothing but God's presence to depend on (Exodus 3:11-12). He was finally ready by God's standards.

Spiritual maturity, like physical maturity, is inseparable from one key ingredient – time. While it is certainly possible for time to pass *without* maturing (Hebrews 5:12-13), the opposite is not true. It is impossible to mature without time passing. It does not matter how passionately we worship, how diligently we study scripture, how zealously we minister to others, or how consistently we fast or pray. All these things are a good *investment* of time, but they can never be a *replacement* for time.

Many Christians would say a believer who has walked with the Lord devoutly for 10 or 20 years could be mature, but how many 10 to 20-year-olds (physically) do you know that you would describe as being a mature adult? Probably none. It is true that if someone is saved or rededicates when they are older, God can redeem all their life experience and character formation up to that point. But there is still something irreplaceable and transformative about decades spent consistently walking with Him.

I am in my mid-thirties. I grew up in a Christian home and sincerely gave my life to the Lord when I was 4 years old. However, my spiritual maturity level, for lack of a better term, is more like that of a ten-year-old. The Lord has made this very clear to me. This may sound strange, but it feels 100% accurate in the right circumstances. For example, my initial response in my emotions feels *exactly* like a ten-year-old if someone insults me, if someone is impressed with me, or if I am debating someone and feel strongly that I am right. Or if I begin fantasizing about one of these things.

There is a lot of freedom in this self-assessment. I know there is nothing wrong with immaturity as long as I am earnestly pursuing growth. I long for Christlikeness, but I'm not in a hurry. My goals for spiritual growth are decades off in the distance.

6. The Fellowship of Christ's Sufferings (Philippians 3:10)

The second to last maturity step Paul identified in Philippians 3 is **“the fellowship of His sufferings”**. Jesus' identity as a sufferer is one of His most important characteristics. For example, consider Isaiah 53, arguably the most lucid description of Jesus in the Old Testament. Verse 3 says:

“He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.”

Many Christians read this and immediately think of the crucifixion. That is certainly part of it. But does it also refer to something more enduring? Something, perhaps, He carried with Him His entire life?

To answer this question, consider another passage where men *despise*, *forsake*, and *hide from* Jesus – John 3:19-20. For clarity, I will replace **“the Light”** with **“Jesus Christ”** or **“Him”**. It says:

“Jesus Christ has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than Him, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates Him, and does not come to Him for fear that his deeds will be exposed.”

There it is. This is why Isaiah said Jesus was **“a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief”** when men despised, forsook, and hid from Him. Jesus was grieved for *their* sakes, not His. He was concerned with what their rejection meant for *them*, not Him. They despised and rejected Him because they loved evil and feared exposure of their true condition. Jesus' grief and sorrow were not *results* of the cross as much as they were *motivators* for it. Grief and sorrow, combined with love, are what caused Jesus to leave heaven and come to earth in the first place.

In fact, even throughout the crucifixion process, Jesus' grief and concern were more for others than Himself. When women wept for Him as He carried His cross, He grieved over the horrors they and their children would experience in a few decades (Luke 23:28). When He saw His mother from the cross, His concern was that she be well taken care of when He was gone (John 19:26). When He saw the Pharisees taunting Him, His still longed for their forgiveness and salvation (Luke 23:34). The greatest sorrow He always felt was for others, not Himself. This is the same sorrow the Father felt in Genesis 6:6 when He saw how evil man became and watched countless souls being lost forever day after day: **“He was grieved in His heart”**.

What is the Fellowship of His Sufferings?

The Christian worldview is simultaneously more wonderful and more terrifying than anyone can fully imagine. To the same degree that God loves us (immeasurable), He is also severe toward sin. To the same degree that eternity for believers is wonderful, the second death is likewise horrible.

Our God is a grieving Father. We cannot possibly grasp the pain He feels over the souls that pour into hell day after day, hour after hour. Every single one was meant to be His son or daughter forever. Instead, they will spend eternity in tormented separation.

Several years ago, I felt an understanding of the reality of hell that shook me to the core. I had trouble eating, sleeping, or thinking about anything else for about two weeks. Now that I am a father, the idea of one of my children dying without Christ is more awful than I can bear to think about. Yet this is the pain God feels continuously, multiplied by infinity.

I hate thinking about hell. I hate that there are billions of people there right now and billions more will go there in the future. I hate that angels rebelled, I hate that mankind fell, and I hate all the terrible things that have precipitated as a result. I hate this war and can't wait for it to be over. I don't hesitate to use this language because I believe God feels the same way. He hates it too. He never wanted this, but the possibility of it was an inescapable byproduct of creating beings with free-wills, beings that could actually choose to love and worship and were not controlled like robots.

I said earlier that there is no higher calling, in a sense, than becoming a spiritual father or mother. It is also probably the most *painful* calling because it involves internalizing God's fatherly love for people that, in some cases, will die without Him. This may be the most terrible suffering a Christian can experience. This is part of what Paul referred to when said he knew **"the fellowship of His sufferings"**.

Suffering For the Kingdom

Jesus was rejected by close friends and family members. He was constantly attacked by spiritual and political leaders. He endured heavy demonic opposition. He was ultimately imprisoned, tortured, and crucified. But He chose all these things willingly because He viewed them in light of the souls that would be saved as a result. The apostle Paul and many others also endured various kinds of suffering on behalf of God's kingdom. Modern-day believers likewise can experience rejection or persecution from friends, family members, or even governments for their faith in Christ. This is another part of **"the fellowship of His sufferings"**.

The Compassion of Jesus

A final aspect of the **"fellowship of His sufferings"** is experiencing Christ's compassion. **"Compassionate"** is the very first word God used when He declared His nature to Moses in Exodus 34:6. The word *compassionate* means *to suffer with*. Because He is compassionate, God experiences our suffering as if it is His own.

Many of the trials we experience are not directly on behalf of God's kingdom, but are just part of living in a fallen world. For example, we may face health issues, a rocky marriage, a difficult boss or coworker, a broken friendship, or a rebellious child. All of these can mature us if we turn to Jesus in the midst of our pain and discover that He is suffering right there alongside us because He cares for us.

7. Being Conformed to Christ's Death (Philippians 3:10, Romans 12:14-21)

Paul concluded the Philippians 3 passage with **"being conformed to [Christ's] death"**. This refers to a lack of desire left to live for worldly or temporal things because only things of eternal value matter. This is likely how Paul felt when he said in Galatians 6:14, **"...the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."**

Perhaps this also coincides with the final step of Romans 12, which commands us to return love and a blessing to those who do us harm (echoing Jesus' command to love our enemies in Matthew 5:44). Sincerely returning love in response to being intentionally, maliciously inflicted with pain or loss is miraculous because it defies temporal explanation.

Unconverted Jews tried to kill Paul several times, yet he was not only willing to die for their sakes, but even to *trade his salvation for theirs if that were possible!* He said in Romans 9:3:

"For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh."

Moses felt the same way toward people who repeatedly accused him and rebelled against his leadership. In Exodus 32:32, he said to God:

"But now, if You will, forgive their sin – and if not, please blot me out from Your book which You have written!"

This kind of love is why Paul could authentically say in Galatians 2:20:

"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."

Jesus is Our Model

Spiritual maturity, in the sense that Paul and the writer of Hebrews describe it, is rare. In fact, I'm not sure I've met anyone who is mature in *all* of the areas we have covered, although I've met some who are mature in some of them. But maybe this rarity is unsurprising. After all, people zealously pursue all kinds of lesser things such as wealth, fame, career accomplishments, advantageous relationships, physical fitness, etc., but relatively few people greatly excel at *any* of them, much less *all* them. How much more then could we expect the far greater pursuit of spiritual maturity, in its many facets, to be lacking plentiful examples in such a fallen world? Truth be told, there are a very limited number of examples even in the pages of scripture.

Let us conclude our discussion by considering Ephesian 4:13, which defines spiritual maturity simply as having **"the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ."** It is true that Jesus is distinct from the rest of humanity in that He rightly received worship (John 20:28, Matthew 2:2, Matthew 14:33, Matthew 28:9), He claimed to be God (John 5:18, John 8:24, John

8:58), He forgave sins (Matthew 9:2, Mark 2:5), and He committed no sin (1 Peter 2:22). However, there is also a sense in which Jesus was fully human and experienced life exactly as we do.

When Jesus walked the earth, He was not omnipotent, omniscient, or omnipresent. Hebrews 2:17 says, **“He had to be made like His brethren in all things”**. Philippians 2:6-7 says He **“did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men”**. This is why He could be **“tempted”** like us (Hebrews 2:18) even though **“God cannot be tempted”** (James 1:13). Jesus was also totally dependent on grace from the Father; He could not accomplish anything on His own. He began life as a child dependent on **“the grace of God”** (Luke 2:40) and He concluded His life at the cross **“by the grace of God”** (see Hebrews 2:9).

Jesus also went through a maturation process. Luke 2:40 says He was **“increasing in wisdom”**. Hebrews 2:10 says the Father endeavored to **“perfect... [Him] through sufferings”**. Philippians 2:8 says, **“He humbled Himself by becoming [i.e. growing, developing] obedient to the point of death...”** Jesus not only modeled the *destination* of spiritual maturity; He modeled the process.

This is why Jesus can be our **“mirror”**. 1 Corinthians 13:12 says we see Him **“in a mirror”**. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says we behold Him **“as in a mirror”**. James 1:23-25 says when we look intently at the perfect law, which Jesus embodies, we are looking **“in a mirror”**. Jesus is the image of what a human being is like, as God created us to be. God was not giving us an impossible standard in commanding us to become like Jesus. He was commanding us to become who we truly are. We just don’t complete the process during this life.

Conclusion

The job of a spiritual parent is to form Christ in his or her children, just as Paul said in Galatians 4:19: **“My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you.”** The reason Paul could say this is because God **“was pleased to reveal His Son in [him].”** (Galatians 1:15-16) First, we pursue maturity ourselves; then we can model it to our children.

However, every parent should remember this: It is more important that we are growing than where we are in the journey. We don’t need to have arrived at a particular milestone to be an effective model. When our children see changes taking place in us, it can actually be *more impactful* than if we didn’t need those changes to begin with because it demonstrates the transforming power of God and His word. This is why Paul told Timothy to obey his instructions **“so that your progress will be evident to all”** (1 Timothy 4:15). Timothy was younger and less experienced than many of those he was leading, but he could still serve as an example because of the direction he was headed in, not because of how far he had gotten.

Next

Spiritual fathers and mothers are America's last hope. They must arise if America is going to alter its course. In the next chapter, we'll discuss where America has been and where it is headed.

CHAPTER 21 – AMERICA’S JOURNEY

In the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, millions of youthful Baby Boomers became unified around some positive ideals such as racial equality, anti-sexism, and anti-materialism. However, this movement commingled with psychedelic drug use, counterfeit spirituality, and sexual promiscuity. An entire generation began to come under heavy satanic bondage.

At the same time, a powerful revival began to unfold. Millions of young Americans were dramatically saved out of the tight grip of the enemy. A foundation was laid for a resurgence of Christianity in America that continued into the ‘80s.

However, beginning in the ‘80s, many Christians became more focused on being blessed and happy than growing closer to God or laying their lives down for the gospel. Others became discouraged by the nation’s moral decline and began to hunker down in premature expectation of the Lord’s return. Gradually, many Baby Boomers and Generation X-ers became like the seeds in Jesus’ parable that fell among the thorns:

“...the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.” (Mark 4:19)

In turn, my generation, Generation-Y and Millennials, have become like the seeds sown beside the road or on rocky places (Matthew 13:19-21). We have heard the word of God, but have either rejected it outright or received it for a little while and then fell away. The vast majority of children or teenagers who professed Christ over the last 20-30 years fell away after becoming adults. We have dishonored our parents and embraced the world’s value systems.

Revival Is Needed

Almost no one would argue with the assertion that Satan’s kingdom has advanced in America over the last 25 years more than God’s kingdom. What are the possible explanations for this? Is it due to God’s lack of desire to move in America? Has Satan out-strategized God? I don’t think so. Truthfully, the responsibility likely lies with us, the church. We are the vehicle of the advancement of God’s kingdom on earth. As the church goes, so goes the nation.

Lukewarmness grips our nation. Lukewarmness is possibly the greatest stronghold to overcome in the last days. Jesus said to the Laodicean church (Revelation 3:16), which some scholars believe is prototypical of the church in the last days:

“So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.”

We are judged according to how faithfully we steward that with which we are entrusted. Jesus said in Luke 12:47-48:

“And that slave who knew his master’s will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes... From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.”

America is in great danger. We have been entrusted with more spiritual light and truth than possibly any nation in history, yet the depths of depravity we are headed toward are beginning to rival some of the wickedest nations in history.

There is Hope

Many preachers have recently applied 1 Chronicles 7:13-14 to America. The passage says:

“If... My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

This is certainly an applicable message for our time. We have never been in more desperate need for revival than we are right now.

Even though lukewarmness grips our nation, many Baby Boomers and Generation X-ers have fought against it. Their hearts remained turned toward God despite access to wealth and comfort beyond any other generation in history. This is very difficult to do, perhaps even more than clinging to Him through hard trials. I believe many who overcome in this way could be extremely useful instruments to God in their later years. Likewise, many Generation Y-ers and Millennials have rejected the lies that enslave their peers and have sought to live wholeheartedly for Christ despite the cost. Their example could help lead many others out of bondage and into freedom.

I believe the church’s greatest need in this hour is for spiritual fathers and mothers to arise. I believe this calling is available even to a believer who spent decades as a lukewarm spiritual wanderer. The wonderful thing about life in God is that true repentance changes everything. The most important segment of any race is the finish. It is never too late to finish strong in the Lord.

I believe it is time for a new start in the Christian family. It is time for each generation to conscientiously help the next continue building with regard to loving God and loving others. It is time for parents to carefully pass on generational blessings and overcome generational bondage. It is time for generations to start treating one another with honor, forgiveness, and humility. It is time for the hearts of the fathers, mothers, and children to be restored to one another. It is time to restore the family in America. It is time to bring heaven into the home.

A Concluding Illustration from Exodus 17

In Exodus 17, Israel faced the prospect of war for the first time since leaving Egypt and becoming a nation. They must have been terrified. They had been slaves their whole lives. They had no military training, unlike the Amalekite army they faced. To muster courage, they needed a constant, visible reminder of both the faithfulness of God and the trustworthiness of the leaders who shepherded them up to this moment. Moses stationed himself atop a hill with the staff of God in his hand while Joshua, his spiritual son, chose the best young Israeli men to lead into battle.

Whenever Moses raised his hands, Israel prevailed, but whenever he lowered them, Amalek prevailed. Therefore, Moses' brother Aaron and another elder named Hur held up Moses' hands until the sun set. As a result, the sons of Israel overwhelmed and defeated Amalek by the edge of their swords.

What an incredible picture. Look at how the generations needed one another. Look at how the young men drew inspiration and hope when their spiritual fathers and leaders stood together in unity, lifting the staff that testified of the great things God had done for them in the past. Look at how the older generation relied on courageous, pure-hearted, zealous young men like Joshua and his brothers to fight for their nation's survival.

Does this picture have any relevance today? Of course, it does. In a spiritual sense, this is what is needed to save America. The family is being decimated rapidly, and uncompromised Christianity right along with it. We are in a battle for survival. The only hope is for each generation of believers to take their places in the fight, through our prayers for mercy, through our steadfast obedience to God and His Word, and through our witness to the lost.

Can America be saved? Is it meant to be saved? How will the coming decades unfold? How soon will the Lord return? Honestly, I don't know the answer to any of these questions. But I do know eternal souls hang in the balance of the collective choices of the body of Christ. And I do know we have a duty to contend for the spiritual welfare of whatever city or nation God has us in for as long as we are alive on earth. Hebrews 11:13 says that Christians are **"exiles"** on the earth. Therefore, perhaps it is appropriate to apply the spirit of Jeremiah 29:7 to our lives, which God commanded to the exiles of Israel:

"Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare."

We are the light of the world. We are the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13-14). We are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing (2 Corinthians 2:15). Therefore, what sort of people ought we to be in holy conduct and godliness (2 Peter 3:11)?

Next

Next, we will consider the intergenerational ministry of John the Baptist.

CHAPTER 22 – JOHN THE BAPTIST

In this chapter, we will look at how John the Baptist's inter-generational ministry described in Malachi 4:5-6 paved the way for Jesus' first coming. Then we will consider whether this passage could also have a special application as we approach His second coming.

Malachi 4:5-6 says:

“Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.”

This prophecy, fulfilled by John the Baptist (see Luke 1:17), was the last statement of scripture written in the Old Testament. For 400 years, Israel watched and waited with its national destiny hinged upon these words. For some reason, this father-child restoration was foundational to preparing the way for Christ. Why?

Jesus' coming marked the transition between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. When this transition took place, there were two generations present. John's ministry acted like a bridge between them. As the last prophet of the Old Covenant, he honored the older generation by leading a revival based on the timeless message of personal repentance and the holiness of God revealed through the law. But he also pointed to another coming revival led by Someone greater than him. This Person would do and teach things no one alive could fully imagine. He would baptize people with the Holy Spirit. He would usher in a new dispensation. He would unveil the long-hidden administration of God's grace and mercy. This was John's dual message.

John honored both what God did in the past and the new thing He was going to do. He prepared fathers and mothers to receive the new, while at the same time helping sons and daughters esteem what God had done in their nation's history. Thus, John's revival brought families together in a way that no other message could have. Without John's message, it is possible that the older generation in its entirety would have rejected Jesus' ministry, unable to see past the Pharisees' intense opposition. This could have sowed a deep generational division into the nation, compromising the foundation of the early church.

Jesus' ministry was going to be difficult for the older generation to accept since it was largely different from anything they had been taught or experienced in the past. However, virtually all of Israel considered John a prophet. They all went out into the wilderness to hear him preach and to be baptized by him. Therefore, John's declaration that Jesus was the Promised One gave credibility to Jesus' message. It helped people be open to Jesus who might otherwise have sided with the Pharisees. This is why, when the Pharisees asked Jesus where He got the

authority to do the things He was doing, He pointed back to one who prepared the way for Him, saying, **“Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?”** (Luke 20:4)

Is There An Application to the Second Coming?

After marriage, the relationship between parents and children is the most foundational building block of God’s kingdom on earth. Parents can only become all they were meant to be by serving their children and helping them lay a strong foundation. And children can only become all they were meant to be by honoring their parents and building upon the foundations they received from them. Parents and children need one another. Therefore, the ministry of restoring the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to the fathers could be especially valuable in the years and decades leading up to the Lord’s return, just as it was for His first coming.

In some ways, Jesus’ return will be much more cataclysmic than His First Coming. The outworking of His First Coming took place mostly inside people’s hearts – the indwelling and baptism of the Holy Spirit; the expression of spiritual gifts; the inclusion of gentiles in the salvation plan. Dramatic, yes, but still mostly invisible to the naked eye.

However, Jesus’ second coming, if the futurists are correct, will culminate with an innumerable army of fiery angels and glorified saints descending from heaven in plain sight to take political authority over the whole earth for one thousand years. Can anyone even begin to grasp what this will be like?

Ever since the fall, God’s plan has been that His will would be done and His kingdom would come on earth just as it is in heaven. However, His kingdom has been coming to the earth in stages. The establishment of the Old Covenant under Moses was one stage. The establishment of the New Covenant through the cross was another stage. The next stage will be Jesus returning to rule over the earth as the King of Kings. The final stage (again, if the futurists are correct) will be the Father coming to dwell with mankind on the renewed earth after the 2nd resurrection and final judgment (Revelation 20-21).

Similar to the ministry of John the Baptist, perhaps the church will declare a dual message in the last days that combines the timeless message of the cross with the soon-coming reality of Christ’s political rule over the earth. Of course, there has been a good deal of teaching about this in *many* generations. Every Christmas when we sing *Joy to the World*, we are reminded that saints in the early 1700s eagerly looked forward to Christ’s reign just like we do. But perhaps this message will increase all the more as we near His return. Perhaps the message of Jesus’ rule will combat the enemy’s rising counterfeits of a secular trans-humanist utopia or global New Age spiritual leaders or Islamic legalistic conformity.

Beginning with Adam and Seth, the advance of God’s kingdom on earth has often been built upon a foundation of family. There is a powerful spiritual synergy that occurs when generations

stand together in unity. Therefore, it would not be surprising if this synergy helps strengthen the church in the years leading up to the Lord's return, just as it did for His first coming.

Next

We have reached the final chapter of the book. In the last chapter, we will discuss the concept of "sowing generational seeds". We will learn how this concept impacted the first century and how it impacts the church in our time.

CHAPTER 23 – SOWING SEEDS

In Mark 4:26-29, Jesus compared the kingdom of God to a man casting seeds upon soil that eventually resulted in a harvest. Because God works on a different timetable than we do, many of the seeds we sow for His kingdom do not come to maturity in our lifetimes, but are saved for future generations. Great spiritual harvests can be the result of an accumulation of seeds sown over many decades or centuries.

An example of this can be seen in John 4 when Samaria experienced a city-wide revival. The harvest that occurred there was due, in part, to saints who had prayed and ministered in generations past. This is why Jesus said to the disciples in verses 35, 38:

“...lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest... I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored and you have entered into their labor.”

The First Century Church

The great spiritual harvest that took place in the early church was a reaping of seeds that had been sown throughout the entire Old Testament. This is why, after walking his readers through all the great saints of history in Hebrews 11 (sometimes called “the Hall of Faith”), the author concluded in verses 39-40 by saying:

“And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.”

Why does that passage say, “...apart from us they would not be made perfect”? They were, in a sense, the final representation of all who had gone before them. The fruit of the Old Testament saints’ labors could not be fully realized until they culminated in a generation that began to see the fulfillment of the ancient promises – that the gospel would spread to all nations (ex. Genesis 12:3, 22:18), that the gates of hell would be defeated (ex. Genesis 22:17), and that the Messiah would rule over the earth (ex. Isaiah 9:6-7). When the author of Hebrews wrote Hebrews 11:39-40, he was acknowledging that his generation was building upon the foundations laid by others. He was honoring their spiritual mothers and fathers.

Consider some of the things the first-century church faced. There was seizure of property, persecution unto death, and state-sponsored occult worship. The world’s most powerful rulers declared themselves gods and demanded worship. Christians were accused of being cannibals, used as human torches, and killed in the arena for entertainment. False teachers, false prophets, and false apostles abounded, wreaking havoc on fledgling churches and leading many astray. Despite all of this, revival fires burned white-hot. The church grew rapidly. A great harvest of souls was reaped.

The Last Day Church

What does this have to do with our time? If futurists are correct, the last day church will also live in a time of great darkness, deception, and apostasy (ex. 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 1 Timothy 4:1, Matthew 24:12, Isaiah 60:1, Revelation 13:12, 14:8). The last day church will also experience heavy persecution and martyrdom (ex. Matthew 24:9, Revelation 6:11, 12:11, 13:7-10). And the last day church will also see unprecedented revival (ex. Daniel 11:32-33, Matthew 13:24-43, Revelation 14:14-16, Zephaniah 3:13-14).

If the first-century church reaped a harvest that had been sown into throughout the Old Testament, as the writer of Hebrews stated, the last day church will likewise reap a harvest that has been sowed into throughout church history, and even since the beginning of time. Just as Jesus said to the disciples in John 4:38, it could likewise be said of the church in the last days:

“I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored and you have entered into their labor.”

Just as the writer of Hebrews said in Hebrew 11:39-40, we could also say of deceased church age saints:

“And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.”

The saints from throughout history still have not fully received what was promised. As stated, they were promised that the gospel would spread to all nations (ex. Genesis 12:3, 22:18), that the gates of hell would be defeated (ex. Genesis 22:17), and that the Messiah would rule over the earth (ex. Isaiah 9:6-7). Therefore, they are now looking to us and our children and our grandchildren. All the seeds they sowed, all the prayers they prayed, all the faith they exercised, and all the labors they performed are still bearing fruit today. We are their family legacy.

During that same revival in Samaria, Jesus also said (John 4:36), “**...so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together.**” I don’t think we can fully imagine the joy the saints in heaven feel as they watch for the seeds they sowed bear fruit in our time. Every soul that is saved is another sibling that will become part of their family forever. Every step of growth is a fuller demonstration of God’s nature to a lost world. We are their hope. They have already run their race; now they are looking to us. They are our biggest fans. They are cheering us on the way parents cheer for their children.

Conclusion

Family reveals the kingdom of God. Family reveals heaven. In heaven, the saints are all brothers and sisters and they have one Father. Jesus is the eldest Brother, the firstborn among many brethren (Romans 8:29). Altogether, the saints comprise a bride and Jesus is their Husband.

When we pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, we are essentially praying for the establishment of an eternal family.

Our biological family is our first training ground for participating in our eternal family. It is where we learn humility, service, love, and forgiveness. When the Bible says the gospel of the kingdom will be preached to all nations (Matthew 24:14), a large part of this is God's kingdom being demonstrated by Christian families.

Every generation is meant to help the next build on its foundation. We all have a part to play, beginning in our own homes, with our own spouses and our own children. If we are faithful in this, we will become *spiritual* mothers and fathers, which is the highest calling human beings were created to fulfill. Our reward in eternity will be great, but more importantly, we will be helping the Father and Jesus Christ receive *their* reward.

"See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are... Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is." (1 John 3:1-2)



“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

John 3:16

If you know the Lord, will you please spend 15-30 seconds right now to pray for the spiritual and physical health and safety of my family and me? Thank you.